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2nd Edition

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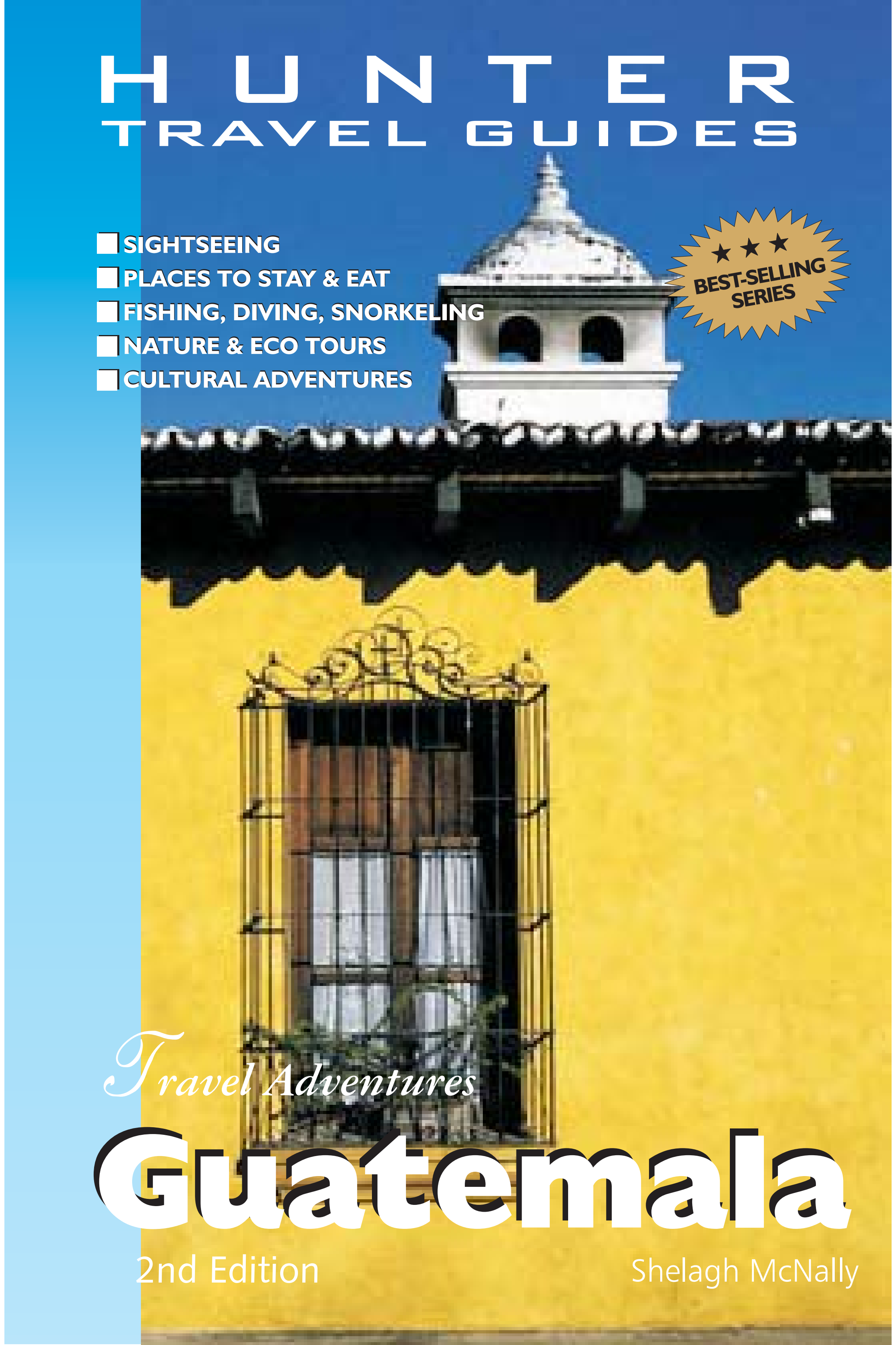

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1 2 3 4

THANKS

It's always an adventure visiting Guatemala and there were quite a few people who helped me along the way. I can't name you all, but there are few that cannot be missed.

Elizabeth Maher and Tom Dunn kept my home fires burning while I went off exploring. My daughter, Shannon Tosic-McNally, provided some important translating while my mother, Lynne Colvey (an intrepid traveler even in her 70s) reminded me to keep my sense of humor and relax. Thanks to all of you for helping me keep it together.

I'm grateful to the wonderful people of Guatemala for their continued kindness and generosity in sharing their country. They inspire me.

This book wouldn't have been as well put together without the tireless patience and dedication of my editor Kim André. Always a pleasure working with you, Kim.

DEDICATION

To Guadalupe. Where would I be without your advice?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shelagh McNally is a Canadian writer who has been visiting Latin America since the mid 1970s. She lived in Mexico from 1997-2002, where she began exploring Guatemala while working as a writer for *Mundo Maya* magazine and other travel publications. She's visited over 35 Maya ruins and still misses the view from atop the pyramids. Her primary residence these days is Montreal, Canada, where she works as an environmental journalist and travel writer. Her Spanish is still terrible.

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Introduction

Guatemala is the heart of the Maya world and it is mysterious, compelling, magical and tragic all at once. Layers of history envelop this country like a patchwork quilt. There are enigmatic Maya ruins alongside grandiose cathedrals built by the Conquistadors. The diversity of the landscapes is astonishing. In a matter of hours you can go from a windswept mountain peak to steamy mangroves by tropical waters. But the real reason we come to Guatemala is for the Maya people. In this age of anonymous, mass-produced culture, they are unique. The Maya have held onto their language, culture and traditions against an onslaught from the Western world that began with Conquistadors and continues with the United States. Their lasting powers are seen in the enigmatic Maya ruins, centuries old, that are found alongside grandiose cathedrals built by the Conquistadors.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- History 1
- Geography & Land 9
- Flora & Fauna 15
- Government & Economy 21
- The People 23

Guatemala offers incredible adventures, not only with the nature but also with the Maya themselves. Coming here changes you – exactly what adventure travel is all about.

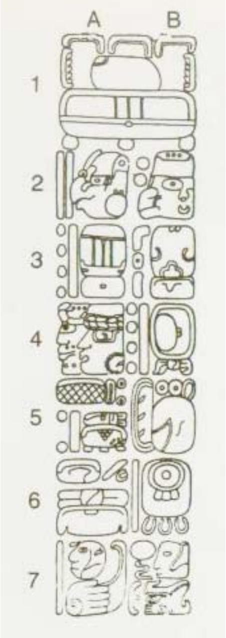
HISTORY

Guatemala has been settled for thousands of years7. Throughout the centuries there have been many battles fought over land and power. Unfortunately, little of the fighting has helped the people of Guatemala, who are still waiting for a more democratic society. In order to understand Guatemala today, you must know its history. Once you understand how much the people have gone through, you can appreciate their courage and admire their ability to still celebrate life.

MUNDO MAYA

The **Olmecs** were the very first to arrive and are considered the forefathers of the Maya. Remnants of their cities and monuments are found scattered throughout the Pacific region and date back to 3000 BC. Little is known about the Olmecs, and most of the information about them comes from Veracruz, Mexico, where many of their sculptures and ruins are found.

The Olmec civilization peaked around 2500 BC. As it began its decline, the Maya emerged, eventually developing into one of the most advanced civilizations in the ancient world. While most of Europe was still squatting in caves, the Maya were building grand temples and pyramids.



Calendar date drawn by Maya scholar SG Morley

The **Preclassic period** began in 1500 BC with the construction of several sites located in Belize and northern Guatemala. By 700 BC, the Maya had advanced enough to develop writing and a hieroglyphic language. They began recording dates and experimenting with mathematics as well. Around 400 BC they made another giant leap forward with their development of the concept of zero. They used this discovery to create their calendar system and develop astronomy using highly evolved mathematics. The Maya calendar system remains the most accurate calendar created by man and was far more precise than the Gregorian calendar used by modern man. Some of their astronomical calculations rival those made at NASA. By 300 BC, the Maya society had created the concept of the king and a hierarchy emerged. The cities of Kaminal Juyú, Abaj Takalik and El Mirador were built up and extensive trade routes grew between them. During this time, the Maya calendar was perfected even further and sophisticated architectural styles were developed.

In AD 200 the **Classic period** began. This was a golden era that saw many cities built and filled with monumental sculptures and magnificent temples. Smaller cities, such as Tikal, blossomed into major forces throughout the Maya world. Other cities – such as Yaxchilán, Dos Pilas, Ceibal, Piedras Negras, Uaxactún, Yaxhá and Naranjo – were built up during this time with their famous stelae and temples. They became part of the network of kingdoms throughout Guatemala. By AD 500, Tikal controlled most of these cities, along with the trade routes extending up into the northern Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico and as far south as El Salvador. Society became even more structured, with an elite competing for a chance to rule. Not only did the king constantly have to prove his right to the throne, he also had to show how he

© Zigomar

Tikal's Temple 1

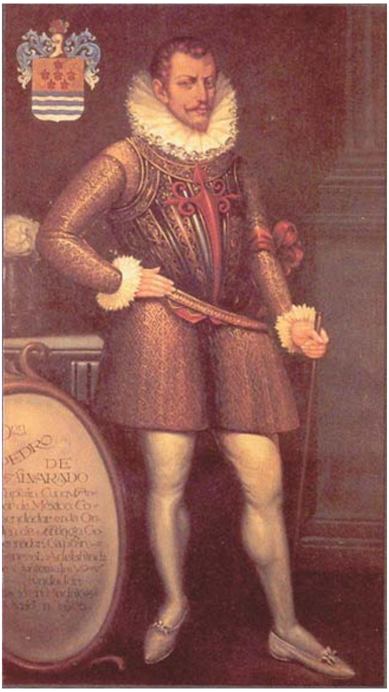
was directly descended from the gods. Monumental art, using limestone carved with hieroglyphics and portraits of the kings, were their main form of propaganda. The elaborate details of their victories have become our best source of information about the Maya.

From AD 705 and well into the **Terminal Classic period** (AD 900-1400), the whole area was plagued by war. One theory is that these prolonged wars were brought about by the necessity of the king to prove his worthiness in battle and to conquer neighboring cities. In AD 800, the **Toltecs** from northern Mexico began invading the Maya world and there were more battles to be fought. By AD 950, long-standing alliances and trade routes had begun to break down and, by AD 976, the Classic period was over; many of the great cities were abandoned.

No one knows what caused the collapse of this great civilization and it remains one of the greatest mysteries surrounding the Maya. But the Maya did not completely disappear. There were pockets of tribes that continued building cities, albeit on a much smaller scale. In AD 1200, the northern **Itzá** tribe, escaping war in the Yucatán, fled south to create their kingdom of Noh-Petén (now Flores) on the island of Chal Tun Ha (Lake Péten). At the same time the Kingdom of **Petexbatún**, farther west, was also building up its cities. But these kingdoms eventually fell and, by AD 1470, only the Northern Highland tribes were flourishing.

The **Cakchiquel** Maya developed their capital city of Ixmiche and began conquering the surrounding tribes. They were soon at war with the **Quiche** and eventually became their slaves. The Quiche developed their capital, K'umarcaaj, and controlled the area until the Conquistadors appeared in 1524.

COLONIAL TIMES



Pedro de Alvarado

Although the Spanish arrived in Central America as early as 1501, they did not visit Guatemala until 1523 when **Hernán Cortés** sent his lieutenant, **Pedro de Alvarado**, to conquer Guatemala. Alvarado had a reputation as a brilliant but vicious solider, and it did not take him long to bring the feuding Maya tribes under his control. After landing on the Pacific coast, he gradually headed north to what is now Quetzaltenango, leaving a trail of death and destruction along the way. He named this newly conquered land the Kingdom of Guatemala; it extended as far north as Chiapas, Mexico and south to Panama. Alvarado founded **Santiago de Caballeros de Guatemala**, the first Conquistador capital, near Ixmiche. This city became his base as he conquered the rest of Central America, Peru and Ecuador. He moved Santiago Antigua to the Panchoy Valley near the foot of Volcán Agua in 1541. Shortly afterwards, he was killed in a battle in Mexico, in an area now known as Guadalajara. Alvarado's wife, Dona Beatriz de la Cueva, took over as the first (and only) female governor of Guatemala. She was in office only a few weeks before being killed in the earthquake and subsequent mudslide that destroyed Antigua Viejo.

The army of soldiers and monks that Alvarado and his wife left behind continued to conquer the country. As part of their campaign to convert the Maya to Christianity, the Franciscan and Dominican monks built churches, cathedrals and convents in every region, often using the rubble from the Maya temples destroyed by Alvarado. By 1650, European disease or guns had killed 85% of the Maya. Those who survived were enslaved and forced to work on Conquistador farms. A small portion escaped to the mountains.

When it was determined that no gold or silver would be found, Spain lost interest in Guatemala and, by the late 1700s, it was almost completely ignored. This did not mean that Spain relinquished its hold, though. It insisted that all of Guatemala's tobacco, indigo, cotton, cacao and cochineal dye be sent directly to Spain and did not allow Guatemala to trade with any other country. This economic bias created a wealthy merchant class centered in Antigua; the rest of the country was populated with poor farmers. Antigua grew into one of the most beautiful cities in Central America, while the rest of the country stagnated.

The 1800s were marked by civil unrest. A rigid social hierarchy had formed, with the Spanish at the top, followed by Creoles (pure Spanish born in Guatemala), then *Ladinos* (Maya and Spanish heritage) and finally the Maya. The Spanish were considered a superior race and, as such, were given the best jobs, salaries, land and business opportunities. The Maya, considered to be just one step above beast of burden, were treated accordingly. Creoles and Ladinos were allowed only into certain professions and many became merchants,or shop or restaurant owners. They became increasingly resentful of Spain's stranglehold on economy and trade and joined forces to create a Liberal opposition, who fought against the power of the Church, Crown and wealthy landowners.

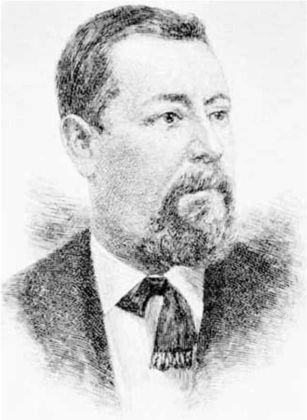
In 1773 a series of devastating earthquakes destroyed much of Antigua and the surrounding areas, delaying social reforms. For the next few years the focus was on rebuilding and recovery. In 1776, the capital was moved to its current location in Guatemala City. When the recovery was almost complete, another series of earthquakes hit in the early 1900s, sliding the country back into chaos. It would take another 20 years before any social reforms would be enacted.

Ruins after the earthquakes are still visible in La Antigua

INDEPENDENCE

On September 15, 1821, 12 of Guatemala's most prominent statesmen signed the Act of Independence of Central America. As soon as Spain released its hold, Guatemala was invaded by the Mexican dictator **Agustín de Iturbide**, who annexed it to his empire. However, the occupation lasted only a year and on June 24, 1823, Guatemala joined the Confederation of Central America as an independent nation. In celebration, there were sweeping reforms, including the end of slavery. But the coalition quickly dissolved into infighting between the countries. The end result was that Guatemala was still not independent, but became embroiled in the problems of the Confederation.

In 1829, the liberal leader **Francisco Morazán** came into power promising autonomy for Guatemala. He began taking land away from the church and rural communities to hand over to private and foreign investors. He also made changes to the educational system and encouraged more Europeans to come to Guatemala by offering them land. His actions alienated the clergy, middle class and rural Maya who, in 1840, joined **Rafaél Carrera** in a successful guerilla war that brought down the oppressive federation and placed Carrera in office. In 1847, Guatemala formally declared itself a sovereign republic. Ironically, Carrera then ruled as a dictator until 1865. He quickly reversed many of Morazán's reforms, returning all the land back to the church and offering tax breaks to wealthy plantation owners. His successor, **General Vicente Cerna**, continued the conservative rule until the **Liberal Revolution** took place in 1871 and **Justo Rufino Barrios** was elected president.



Justo Rufino Barrios

Barrios may have been called a Liberal, but he firmly supported the oligarchy of wealthy landowners by restructuring the economy to give even more land, money and tax breaks to those with coffee, cotton and sugar plantations. As the owner of a coffee plantation, he profited handsomely from his rules. Barrios also opened up the country to foreign investors and gave out vast tracts of land (taken from local Maya) to European immigrants. Barrios then passed a law requiring all Maya to give four years of work to state-appointed farms. He also made it illegal for any Maya to be out of work – a Maya without a job was considered a vagrant and could be immediately arrested and forced to work on the plantations as a virtual slave.

When Barrio opened the doors to American investors, they swooped in with such ferocity that by 1901 the USA was the dominant economic force in Guatemala. The American-owned United Fruit Company became the largest landowner, employer and exporter in the country and was nicknamed El Pulpo because it had so many fingers in so many areas. The term "banana republic" was also coined to describe the politics of this destructive multinational corporation. Labor unions and workers began to voice their discontent, but their protest did not last long. In 1931 the ultra-right wing dictator **General Jorge Ubico** was elected. With financial backing from the United States, Ubico began a vicious campaign that suppressed all land reform movements, outlawed unions and disbanded agrarian organizations. Those supporting land reform went missing or were tortured into recanting their beliefs.

LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR WAR

While the stockholders in the United Fruit Company got rich, the people of Guatemala were starving. By 1940 infant mortality had reached an all-time high. The middle class was angry over the limited access to education and health care. In 1944, a group of students and merchants forced Ubico out of office and brought **Juan José Arevalo** to power. Arevalo immediately overturned the vagrancy laws, introduced a minimum wage, legalized unions and put through a national health care system. It looked as if Guatemala was on its way to becoming a democracy.

Arevalo was followed by **Jacobo Arenz**, who was elected in 1950 and immediately passed the **Agarian Reform Law**, requiring all companies to hand back any large tracts of uncultivated land for distribution among peasant farmers. The law was clearly aimed at the United Fruit Company. Feeling their profits were threatened, the United Fruit Company convinced the American Government that Guatemala was becoming communist. The States responded quickly by organizing a coup executed by the CIA. In 1954, the CIA ousted Arbenz from office and put into power a right wing dictator, **Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas**. With his US-funded army, Castillo Armas proceeded to arrest and torture over 9,000 Maya peasants, claiming they were communists and a threat to the state.

Castillo Armas also repealed the Agrarian Reform Law, outlawed labor unions and reversed every other reform put in place by his "communist" predecessors. Wealthy landowners and multinational corporations flourished under his rule, while the ordinary citizen suffered immensely. For the next 32 years Guatemala was ruled by dictators equally as vicious as Castillo Armas. The rich became richer and the poor became more desperate and angry. The foundation for war had been laid.

THE SCORCHED EARTH

The poverty of Guatemala was exacerbated by United States intervention. In the 1960s, AID (US Agency for International Development) began promoting cattle farms as a means to boost the Guatemalan economy. The one flaw in this approach was the amount of land needed for grazing. Once again, the Maya were thrown off their farms to make way for large cattle ranches. In 1961, a band of left-wing military officers staged a rebellion to stop the confiscation of land. It was a failure and the rebels fled into the mountains where they joined forces with students and labor leaders. This small group of rebels had few resources and didn't pose that much of a threat, but Guatemala responded by asking the America to send in their Green Berets. In 1964, America began sending arms to the Guatemalan Army and, shortly afterwards, a civil war was underway.

By 1966 the army had killed 8,000 "communists" and over the next seven years another 30,000 were slaughtered. By 1975 the body count was up to 60,000. To add to the misery there was a devastating earthquake in 1976 that killed another 22,000 people and left one million homeless. In 1978, **General Lucas García** took over and, in 1982, he joined forces with the born again Christian President **Efrain Ríos Montt**. Together they implemented the Scorched Earth policy to cleanse Guatemala of communists. The army burst into hundreds of villages and burned them to the ground; residents were massacred and buried together in clandestine graves. Over 1.5 million people were left homeless and over 25,000 people were killed. Four rebel armies joined forces to fight García and Montt, calling themselves the **Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unit** (URNG). The URNG killed those who were sympathetic to the government. Most of the people under attack were actually neutral, innocent farmers caught in the crossfire between the government and the URNG.

Rigoberta Menchu

In 1985 there was hope that the war would end with the election of **Marco Vinicio Cerezo Arevalo**. But the war continued. In 1990 **Jorge Serrano Elias** was elected president and he re-opened peace talks with the URNG. There was a lull in the violence. The talks went slowly and peace did not seem likely, but in October 1992 **Rigoberta Menchu**, a Quiché woman from Nebaj, won the Nobel Peace Price and the world turned its eye to Guatemala. Unfortunately, Serrano staged a coup and had to be replaced by **Leon Capri**.

HOPE FOR PEACE

In 1995 the USA announced it was suspending all humanitarian aid to Guatemala because of its failure to investigate the disappearance of several US citizens in its country. This plunged the local peasants further into poverty. And people despaired when **Rios Montt**, now known as Guatemala's Pinochet, was re-elected in 1995. He was in office long enough to have a mini-killing spree in Alta Verapaz before being defeated in the 1996 election. The election was won by **Alvaro Arzu**, leader of National Advancement Party (PAN), a predominantly leftist and indigenous group. That year, the URNG declared a cease-fire and in December 1996 the final three of the 10 peace treaties were signed. The toil on Guatemala was staggering – over 150,000 people were dead, 50,000 missing, there were 100,000 refugees and over one million homeless.

By 1999, the conservative right-wing FRG was back in power when **Alfonso Portillo** won 68% of the votes. That year, an exhaustive study done by the UN was released, concluding that the army was responsible for 90% of all killings. Bill Clinton formally apologized for the US part in the civil war. In July 2002, the Pope visited Guatemala to canonize the country's first saint, 17th-century missionary **Pedro de San Jose de Betancur.**

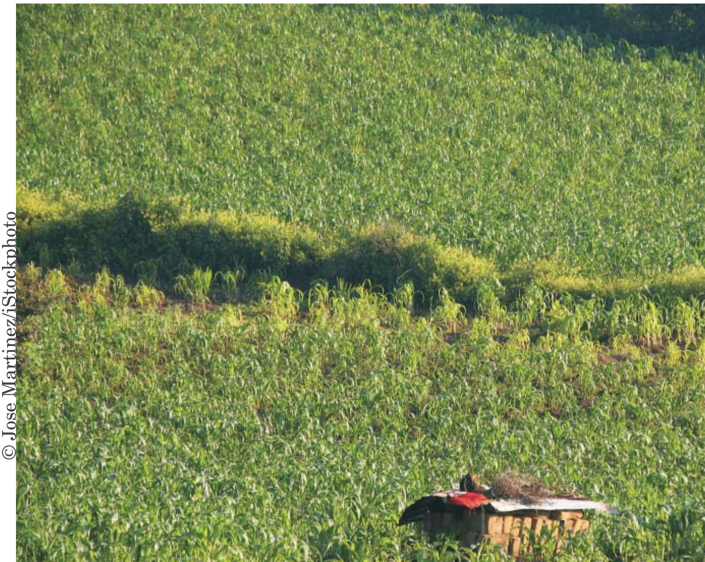
While the future looked bright, things looked grim when it appeared the FRG had won the 1993 election. A recount election put **Oscar Berger Perdomo** into power as head of the conservative Gran Alianza Nacional (GANA), an alliance between several political parties. The FRG responded by ransacking parliament and going on a killing spree. Parliament made a ruling that Rios Montt could never run for office again.

The Berger administration has been hailed in some circles for its work in devolution, but the country continues to struggle. In 2006 the GANA fractured into many smaller parties, further delaying legislations of reform. The country's presidential elections in September 2007 showed a split down the middle between the social democratic UNE party and Perez's Patriot Party. After months without a decision, **Álvaro Colom Caballeros** (UNE) finally took over as President in January 2008. He will serve a four-year term.

GEOGRAPHY & LAND

Guatemala is a relatively small country covering 42,355 square miles (108,430 square km), but it has a very diverse landscape. Limestone plateaus sit next to majestic mountain ranges dotted with pristine lakes and rivers; active and inactive volcanoes are located alongside rainforests and tropical beaches. What's great for travelers is that they can easily move from one environment to another in a short period of time.

Because of it location and geography, Guatemala possesses great biological diversity. In order to protect this natural heritage the Guatemalan government began establishing protected



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national parks, reserves and biospheres. The first park was created in 1955 and the most recent one was designated in 2002. Today, there are over 30 protected areas and another 40 are being proposed.

BORDERS

Guatemala is the northernmost country in Central America. It shares its northwestern border with **Mexico** and its northeastern border with **Belize**. To the south it touches **El Salvador** and **Honduras**. The eastern coastline has only a small section that opens up in the **Bay of Honduras**, providing access to the **Caribbean Sea**. The western coastline is much larger and stretches along the **South Pacific Ocean** with beaches of black volcanic sand.

REGIONS

Guatemala is divided up into 22 **departments**, the equivalent of states or provinces. Often, the capital city has the same name as its department. For the purpose of this book, we have divided the country into seven regional chapters, plus a separate chapter for Guatemala City.

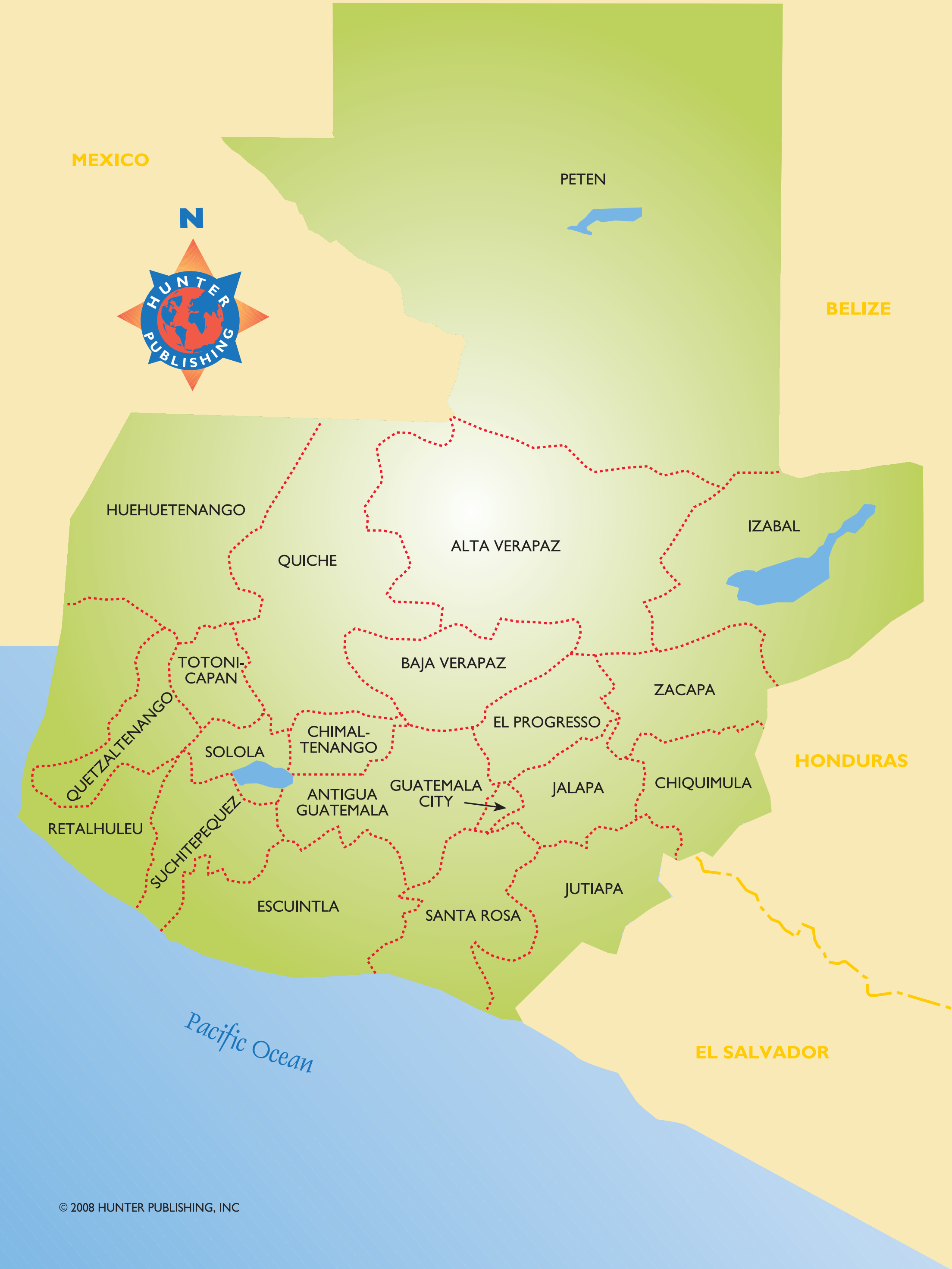
CENTRAL HIGHLANDS

© Bruce Girin

Boats on the shore of Lake Atitlán

Made up of the departments of Chimaltenango, Sololá and Sacatepéquez, the Central Highlands is very popular with tourists. The **Sierra Madre Mountain Range**, which runs through the area, has created volcanoes, deep valleys, ravines, mountain plains and plateaus. Despite two major fault lines and a propensity for earthquakes and eruptions, this area is the most densely populated in Guatemala. There are two active volcanoes – **Pacaya** and **Fuego** – and three extinct volcanoes that surround **Lake Atitlán**. Many villages around this famous lake have become popular tourist destinations. The beautiful colonial city of **Antigua** is found in the Panchoy Valley. The capital, **Guatemala City**, is nestled in the Ermita Valley, surrounded by mountains and volcanoes.

Departments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HONDURAS
ANTIGUA GUATEMALA
GUATEMALA CITY
JALAPA
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RETALHULEU
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JUTIAPA
Pacific Ocean
EL SALVADOR

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LOS ALTOS

Los Altos is the most mountainous and remote area in the country and includes the departments of Quetzaltenango, San Marcos, Totonicapán and Huehuetenango. Between the volcanic mountain chain of the **Sierra Madre** in the south and the **Cuchumatánes Mountains** in the north are pine forests, lakes, streams and deep valleys. There is one active volcano, **Santiaguito**. Traditional Maya villages are located in the valleys and plateaus. Temperatures are much colder here due to the high altitudes. The country's second- largest city, **Quetzal- tenango**, also known as Xela, is located here in the Quetzaltenango Valley. The area grows coffee, maize, apples, rice and cardamom. Cattle and sheep ranches, as well as factories, also play an important role in the economy. The area is famous for its weavers.

Traditional blankets are woven in the Los Altos region

NORTHERN HIGHLANDS

Mountains make up 60% of Guatemala's land mass. The highlands are the most populated area and also receive the most tourists. The Northern Highlands encompass the departments of Quiché, Alta Verapaz and Baja Verapaz. To the east, the **Sierra de Chuacús mountain range** joins the **Cuchumatánes Mountains** and gives way to the virgin rainforests of the north. To the west are the **Sierra de las Minas Mountains**. Because of its location at the foot of two mountain ranges, the Northern Highlands are filled with rivers and the area is one of the country's wettest and greenest. The mighty **Río Cahabon** and **Río Polochíc** flow through this department, fed by the Chioxy-Usumacinta river system that originates in the Gulf of Mexico. And the rivers flowing in and out of the mountains have created a series of underground grottoes and caves considered to be some of the natural wonders of Guatemala. The Northern Highlands is primarily a rural area, producing coffee, cardamom, rice, broccoli, corn and black pepper.

EL PETÉN

El Petén is the most northern and largest of the departments sharing a western border with Chiapas, Mexico; a northern border with Campeche, Mexico; and an eastern border with Belize. It is a vast area filled with savannas, swamps, tropical jungles and ancient Maya ruins. In fact, the largest temples and cities are found here. El Petén remains the least populated region and, with a high unemployment rate, is one of the poorest.The influx of people into the rainforests has begun to threaten the wildlife, while oil and timber companies are waiting to move in and start development of the region. The **Maya Biosphere Reserve** was created in 1990 to prevent further destruction of the rainforest here. El Petén's capital city is **Flores**, located on an island in the middle of **Lake Petén**. It serves as the jumping-off point for visiting various ruins, including the famous **Tikal National Park**, **Uaxactún**, **Dos Pilas** and **Ceibal**.

IZABAL

East along the Caribbean coast is the department of Izabal. The city and its surroundings are also called the Guatemalan Caribbean. The area is a combination of plains and hills, with Guatemala's largest lake in the middle feeding many small rivers and lagoons. **Río Dulce** meets the lake near the coast and eventually flows out into the **Amatiqué Bay** and the **Caribbean Sea** near the Garífuna town of Lívingston. There are acres of wetlands, mangroves and aquatic ecosystems in this department. The capital city is **Puerto Barrios**, a commercial port and the launching point for exploring reserves in the area. The ruins of Quiriguá, an UNESCO World Heritage Site, are also found in this department.

EASTERN PLAINS

The only desert in Central America is found in the Eastern Plains of Guatemala (departments of Jutiapa, Jalapa, Chiquimula, Zacapa, and El Progresso), where several rare cacti have been found. The desert landscape soon gives way to rolling hills with subtropical forests, volcanic peaks and sulfur lakes. The lush valleys here produce sugar cane, tobacco, cocoa, bananas, melon okra, sesame seeds, grapes, corn, fruits and black beans. The **Sierra de las Minas Mountains** yield minerals such as barium, zinc, fluorite, gold, silver, lead, iron, titanium and nickel.

PACIFIC COAST

Escuintla, Retalhuleu, Santa Rosa and Suchitepequez make up the tropical Pacific Coast region. The upper part of this area is formed by a range of volcanoes that descends down into fertile lowlands. This is another agricultural area, producing sugar cane, cotton, bananas, coffee, cattle, cardamom, corn, black beans, soybeans, sesame seeds, fruits, shrimp and rubber. The coastline has black volcanic ash and mangrove wetlands that are the breeding grounds for many water birds as well as sea turtles. The **Monterrico Natural Reserve** is found in this area along with ancient Olmec ruins dating back to 1500 BC.

PARKS & RESERVES

Volcano Parks	*Location*
Acatenango-Fuego Complex	Sacatepéquez, Chimaltenango
Agua Volcano	Sacatepéquez
Tajumulco Volcano	San Marcos
Pacaya Natural Park	Escuintla
Wetlands, Woodlands, Rainforest & Cloudforest Parks	
Bocas del Polochíc (freshwater wetlands)	Izabal
Cerro San Gil Wildlife Refuge (tropical rainforest)	Izabal
Lachua National Park	Alta Verapaz
Laguna El Tigre-Río Escondido Protected Biotope (wetlands)	El Petén
Maya Biosphere Reserve (rainforest)	El Petén
Sierra de Las Minas Biosphere (cloud forest)	El Progreso, Las Verapaces Zacapa, Izabal
Archeological Parks	
Ceibal and Aguateca-Dos Pilas Cultural Monuments	El Petén
Iximché Cultural Monument	Chimaltenango
Quiriguá Cultural Monument	Izabal
Tikal National Park, Archeological	El Petén
Nature & Wildlife Parks	
Cerro Cahui Protected Biotope (wildlife refuge)	El Petén
Chocón Machacas Biotope (manatee reserve)	Izabal
El Zotz Protected Biotope (bat reserve)	El Petén
Lake Atitlán (natural reserve)	Sololá
Mario Dary Biotope (quetzal refuge)	Baja Verapaz
Monterrico Natural Reserve-Hawaii National Park (mangrove reserve/turtle sanctuary)	Santa Rosa
Tikal National Park (archeological/wildlife refuge)	El Petén
Punta de Manabique Biotope (marine/coastal wetlands)	Izabal
Semuc Champey Natural Monument (river)	Alta Verapaz
Sierra de Los Cuchumatánes (mountain range)	Huehuetenango, Quiché

FLORA & FAUNA

Guatemala's unique position between two continents and two oceans makes it one of the most bio-diverse countries in Latin America. This "land of eternal spring" has the perfect climate for over 19 ecosystems ranging from the mangrove forests on both coasts to the pine forests and cloud forests of the mountains to the desert thorn forests found in between.

PLANTS

For the most part, it is an incredibly lush country, with over 8,000 species of plants, including 600 species of **orchids**. Orchids are plentiful and beautiful in Guatemala. They belong to the family of **epiphytes**, a class of plants that do not root in soil but live off sunlight and the moisture in the air. These "air plants" attach themselves to other plants, not as a parasite, but simply to position themselves closer to the rain and sun. Many mosses, lichens, algae, and liverworts are also epiphytes, including the **Spanish moss** (*Tillandsia usneoides*) seen in the cloud forests. Of course, the most famous epiphyte is the national flower, the **monja blanca** (white nun) orchid. Another striking species found in the cloud and humid mountain forests are the delicate **maidenhair ferns** of the family *Polypodiaceae*, easily identified by their dainty fronds on thin stalks.

Warm humid forests also have the ideal growing conditions for dozens of **palm** species. These plants are easily recognized by their distinct single trunk that fans out into leaves. Many types of palms are important economic crops used for their food, fiber and oil. The largest export is the xate (sha-tay) palm, used as a fill in for commercial flower arrangements. The commercial farming of xate is now causing serious degradation of the ecosystems in the Alta Verapaz and El Petén regions.

Guava fruit on tree

Guava plants are found everywhere in Guatemala, except in the cloud forests, which are too high up for this plant to flourish. It belongs to the myrtle family, characterized by lovely green leaves and beautiful fragrant flowers and fruit. Over 450 varieties grow in Guatemala. Another genus found throughout is the **jacaranda**. There are over 50 different types of jacaranda, but the most common is a plant with periwinkle blue clustered flowers. **Cassava**, also known as **yucca**, is a large bush with greenish-yellow flowers. It's the primary source of tapioca, but its roots are also used to make bread or eaten as a vegetable.

FORESTS

Despite numerous plants and flowers, it is the trees that really define Guatemala. The actual word "Guatemala" comes from the Nahuatl language and means "Land of Trees." Fifty-one percent of the country is forest, either coniferous, broad-leaved, tropical or mixed. The mountain forests are filled with **pine** and **cypress** and the cloud forests have some of the largest specimens found in Central America. Many of these trees are prized for their wood and Guatemala has had a long struggle with logging companies over their depletion of the forests. **Logwood** (*Haematoxylum campechianum)* is a native tree that was prized for its dark red sap. It was used to produce a purple dye highly sought-after in the 19th century. Another popular tree is the **caoba mahogany**, a favorite tree for furniture and other wooden objects because of its strength and attractive grain, resistant to both rot and termites. **Teak** is another tree prized for its hard wood. The magnificent **ceiba** is the sacred tree of the Maya, who use it to explain the universe (the limbs and leaves represent heaven, the trunk is earth and the roots are the underworld). The ceiba can reach a height of 130 feet (40 m).

Breadfruit

In the tropical zones of Izabal, the Petén and Pacific, the trees are more likely to be fruit-bearing, such as the **breadfruit** (*Artocarpus altilis*). This incredibly useful plant has a fruit that resembles an oversize mango, valued for its pulp and juice. The **calabash** (*Crescentia cujete*) tree grows to 30 feet (nine meters) and is used for its tough and flexible wood, as well as for the fruit that resembles a gourd. Everyone enjoys the fruit of the **cashew**, a tropical evergreen found throughout Guatemala. The **coconut** is another tropical tree found in the coastal regions. **Tamarind** is a tropical evergreen tree that reaches heights of 80 feet (24 m). Its acidic fruit is used as a spice as well as a candy and tamarind juice sweetened with sugar is a popular drink in Guatemala.

Also in the tropical areas are the swamps filled with red, white and black **mangroves**. These trees have

Mangroves

a special root system that allows them to filter salt water and thrive in the shallow, brackish waters of the tropical swamps. They are easily recognized by their tangle of roots that arch above the water. The red mangrove belongs to the family *Rhizophoraceae* and is classified as *Rhizophora mangle*. The white mangrove belongs to the family *Combretaceae,* while the black mangrove belongs to the family *Verbenaceae* and is classified as *Avicennia germinans*.

CROPS

Guatemala's commercial crops include banana, coffee, melon, tobacco, sugar, potato, tomato, watermelon, papaya, Chile pepper, pineapple, corn, yucca, cucumber, beans, pineapple and guava.

WILDLIFE

Guatemala's wildlife is equally diverse, with over 600 species of birds living alongside 250 species of mammals, 200 species of reptiles and amphibians and hundreds of species of butterflies and insects.

The forests are filled with deer, foxes, monkeys, peccaries, jaguars, tapirs, coatis, tepezcuintles and pumas.

Baird's tapir is a native of Guatemala. This nocturnal, herbivorous mammal resembles a large pig, but with a flexible snout and short legs. It can reach up to 600 pounds, but is an extremely agile runner and swims quite fast. They are shy animals and are hunted by locals for their meat.

Baird's tapir

The **jaguar** is one of the most revered animals in the Maya world and consequently there is much religious iconography associated with the animal. The most common type is yellow with black spots. The black jaguar is extremely rare. The jaguar is currently on the endangered species list and its numbers are dwindling due to hunting and loss of habitat. The **ocelot** is another jungle cat, much smaller than the jaguar. It resembles an overgrown house cat, with black stripes on a gray background. Its most notable features are large black eyes.

The loud, ferocious howling heard in the jungle at sunrise and sunset is the cry of the **howler monkey** (*Mono Congo*). Despite their seemingly murderous yells, howler monkeys are actually gentle vegetarians living in family groups. The male can grow to 15 pounds and he protects his family by the ferocious howls used to both warn his family and intimidate his enemies. They are very curious creatures and will sometime

Spider monkey jumping from one branch to another
(© Ronald Callaghan/Dreamstime)

follow groups of humans. The **spider monkey** is another breed of smaller primate, with slender limbs and a prehensile tail that it uses to swing from branch to branch. Locals also call this monkey "capuchino" because its brown face with white eyes resembles the outfits worn by the Capuchin religious order.

The **coatimundi** is a member of the raccoon family and, like most raccoons, will eat anything. It lives in the trees and on the ground and is easily recognized by its long white nose and bushy tail. The **kinkajou** (*Potus Flavus*) is a funny looking creature with the face of a koala bear and the body of a raccoon. It's a nocturnal creature that comes out after sunset to feed on fruit and insects, using its prehensile trail to leap from treetop to treetop. It's the easiest animal to spot in the jungle. The **tepezcuintles**, also known as the **paca**, is a nocturnal rodent that lives in the forest. It is found throughout the country wherever there is water. It's easily hunted and the meat is considered a delicacy. Guatemala is also becoming famous for the various types of **bats** that live here, particularly in the El Zotz region of the Petén.

Crocodiles, manatees, fish and crustaceans fill the fresh water lakes and rivers of Guatemala. The shy **manatee** is a sea cow that inhabits the waters of the Izabal and is difficult to spot. So are the **caimans** or crocodiles, often mistaken for logs since they can lie for hours with just their nostrils and eyes above water. They are found in many of the mangroves and fresh water rivers and can grow up to 17 feet in length (5 m).

Check with locals before swimming. The most common fish found in the fresh waters throughout Guatemala is **bass** and **perch**. On the coast it is mojarra (**perch**), robalo (**snook**), tarpon machaca (**shad**), **white mullet**, **catfish** and **lizardfish**. Also on the Pacific coast you will find big game fish such as **swordfish**, **tuna**, **wahoo**, **dorado** and **blue marlin**.

One of the defining animals of the jungle is the iguana. The friendliest and most abundant is the common **green iguana**. Although they can grow up to six feet (1.6 m), they are harmless creatures and can be found resting in branches of trees or sunning on large rocks. Locals hunt them for their meat and eggs. One of the more amusing lizards is the **Jesus Christo (Jesus Christ) lizard**, named for its ability to stand on two legs and skim across the water to escape predators.

© Manuel de Corselas

Green iguana

As with any tropical area, there are plenty of snakes here. Fortunately the vast majority are not venomous and nocturnal. However, the **coral snake** should be avoided. It is easily recognized by its bright rings of red, yellow and black. Probably the most feared snake is the "barba amarilla" (yellow beard or **fer-de-lance**). This aggressive snake is known for attacking without provocation.

INSECTS

There is no shortage of insects in Guatemala. There are hundreds of butterflies in a variety of sizes and colors. One of the most flamboyant is the **blue morpho**, which grows to five inches and is a bright electric blue. Like most butterflies, it has an underside that is quite drab. You

Monarch butterfly

have to wait for it to open its wings before you can see the color. Other common butterflies are the **monarch**, with orange and black wings, and the **red butterfly**, with wings of silver and red. While walking in the forest, keep an eye out for the industrious **leaf cutter ants**, who snip pieces of leaves and carry them back to their nest. Their trails can be a quarter-mile long. **Red ants**, with their vicious bites, are the only ones you will need to avoid.

Likewise, stay away from the **tarantula**, **black widow** (*latrodectus*) and **brown recluse** (*loxosceles*). All three of these spiders are poisonous. The large, hairy black and orange tarantula is known locally as the "araña de caballo" (horse spider). Although painful, its bite is not fatal. However, both the black widow and brown recluse can cause serious tissue damage from their bite. Both are found in dark, hidden places. The brown recluse spider (*Loxoceles reclusa*), sometimes referred to as the violin spider, is identified by the black violin-shaped mark on its head.

BIRDS

Probably the most spectacular fauna in Guatemala are the birds. With so many different ecosystems, there is a wide range of songbirds, predators and waterfowl.

The **quetzal** has become the nation symbol of Guatemala. Images of this beautiful bird are everywhere. None the less, as a result of habitat degradation quetzals themselves are becoming increasingly scarce. The quetzal resides within the misty depths of high altitude cloud forest and is known to shy away from the prying presence of visitors.

The scarlet macaw is one of the most brilliantly colored birds in the woods of Guatemala.

Around the flanks of volcanoes, you will spot such colorful species as the azure-rumped, black-capped **siskin**, **tanager**, **rufous saberwing**, **maroon-chested ground-dove** and **Pacific parakeet**. As you climb higher, you will spot the magnificent predatory birds, such as the **great**

black hawk and **grey-headed kite**. In the cloud forests there are a number of brilliant birds, such as the **pink-headed warbler**, **blue-throated motmot** and **horned guan**, as well as the resplendent **quetzal**, the national bird of Guatemala. The mangroves are the nesting grounds for such birds as the **blue** and **white heron**, **white ibis**, **blue kingfisher**, **chachalaca**, **roseate spoonbill**, **pygmy kingfisher** and **collared plover**.

For a list of conservation organizations operating in Guatemala, see the *Appendix*, page 473.

© Johnskate17

White ibis

GOVERNMENT & ECONOMY

POLITICS

Politics is a complicated business, with over 40 political parties in action. Guatemala had its first democratic election in over 50 years in November, 1999. The election came down to a race between Oscar Berger of the Frente Republicano Guatemalteco (FRG), the opposition party with 33% support, and Alfonso Antonio Portillo Cabrera of the Partido de Avanzada Nacional (PAN), the conservative party in power, which had 30% of the vote. Alvaro Colom of the Alianza Nueva Nación (ANN), a party of ex-guerillas, was the third candidate. Portillo was a controversial candidate because of his connection to Ríos Montt, also running on the FRG ticket. Montt was executor of the scorched-earth policy that destroyed entire villages and left thousands of Guatemalans either homeless or dead. Portillo himself has been quite open about killing several people, claiming it taught him how to protect Guatemala and bring about an end to violence and crime in the country. Amazingly, the voters responded to Portillo and elected him with an overwhelming majority. Oscar Berger and the PAN obtained enough votes to remain the official opposition.

The last few years since the elections has seen a continuation of human rights abuse. However, the government has acknowledged the abuses of the previous FRG regime, particularly after the 1998 investigation by the Catholic bishop Juan Gerardi (who was then assassinated). In 2001, several trials began against those accused of human rights abuses. Montt himself faced a jury in the fall of 2002. A verdict has not been reached. **Álvaro Colom** is now President of Guatemala.

ECONOMY

Guatemala GDP for 2001 was an estimated $20 billion. Since the signing of the peace accord in 1996, the economy has been growing rapidly. Eighty-five percent of the economy is generated by the private sector. Most of the manufacturing is light assembly and food processing, geared to the Central American marketplace as well as the US. The majority of Guatemala's exports are agricultural goods – **sugar**, **bananas** and **coffee** are the main exports. Recently, the country has started exporting textiles, apparel, winter vegetables (such as broccoli and potatoes), fruit and cut flowers. **Tourism** is also becoming important.

© Marcelo Carrea

Mature coffee on tree

Harvesting sugarcane

The **United States** remains Guatemala's biggest trade partner, with **Canada** a close second. The government sector is small and underfunded, and many of the public utilities, such as the telephone, ports and airports, have been privatized, which has driven up costs further.

The international community is helping Guatemala with its recovery from the civil war. France, Italy, Spain, Germany, Japan, Canada and the United States are all donating resources and financing projects. The major challenges to Guatemala's economy are the high levels of illiteracy (30% of men and 50% of women), lack of capital and a weak infrastructure. The transportation, telecommunications and electricity sectors are all poor.

Despite the growing economy there is still a great deal of poverty. According to the United Nations, 87% of all Guatemalans currently live in poverty, 60% lack basic health care and 30% have no access to potable water. Infant mortality remains high. The gulf between the rich and poor is wide and unequal land distribution has resulted in two percent of the population owning 68% of all cultivable land. The wealthy, who make up only 10% of the population, receive two-thirds of all the income. The remaining 90% must live on what is left. International aid is contingent upon the government's continued dedication to economic reforms and improvements in human rights.

THE PEOPLE

CULTURAL GROUPS & RELIGION

© Shelagh McNally

Guatemalan masks for sale in La Antigua

Over 55% of the population is **Maya Indian**, 35% is *Ladino* (Maya and European descent), and the remainder is of mixed heritage. There are 24 recognized Maya dialects and tribes throughout the country. The Maya have held onto their traditions and proudly celebrate their heritage through everyday dress, religious rituals, music and dance. Each village has its own *traje*, or handmade clothes, woven and embroidered with brilliant colors. The origins of *traje* are not clear. Some believe it was an invention of the Spanish used to keep track of the Maya, but others think the costumes are too elaborate to be created solely for that reason. Either way, *traje* is part of the Maya heritage and people wear theirs with pride. Each village has its own *traje* and language, creating a rich cultural mosaic. The common thread connecting all village is **Market Day**, the most important event of the week. Guatemala has become famous for its markets, and visitors come in search of the beautiful textiles, pottery, masks and wooden carvings that have become icons of the country. The Central Market in Guatemala City and the Market in Chichicastenango are the two largest, with the widest selection of crafts. Panajachel also has a large outdoor market.

Sadly, most Maya survive through subsistence farming and supplement their income by selling their weavings or working on large coffee and fruit plantations for meager wages.

For the most part the ***Ladino*** culture is urban and eagerly embraces everything modern. Most of the economic and political power lies in their hands.

Guatemala has been hard on its indigenous people, ignoring their human rights, but not hesitating to shamelessly exploit their exotic hold on tourists. The good news is that the Maya are now participating in the

© Shelagh McNally

Antigua's cathedral

growing eco-tourism industry, which allows them to preserve their way of life and have a decent income.

© Shelagh McNally

Local man resting by cross in a church courtyard, Santigao Atitlán

The country is predominantly **Catholic**, with a growing population of **Evangelists**. The Maya in particular are quite conservative and you should dress with respect for this. Women should dress modestly when traveling to the more rural areas. Tight clothes that reveal a lot of flesh will be frowned upon. Often, Maya women will not talk to strangers, particularly gringo men. If you need to ask for directions, approach someone of the same sex.

On the whole, Guatemalans are much more polite than the average American. Too many tourists forget to use "please" and "thank you." Learn a few polite phrases in Spanish and you will be amazed at the warm reception you receive (see page 484 for our Spanish glossary). Rude behavior, such as loud demands or impatience with someone giving you service, will get you ignored.

Festivals and religious holidays and fiestas are an integral part of Guatemalan social life. There are over 371 festivals celebrated throughout the country, so on any given day there is some kind of celebration going on. The holidays are a blend of religion and history, celebrating past events as well as the culture itself. For a more detailed description of the holidays please refer to the Holidays & Festivals section (page 30).

LANGUAGE

Spanish is Guatemala's official language, although the majority of the Maya learn their own language first; in more remote villages, Spanish is a second language spoken by few. There is little English in Guatemala, except in the more tourist-oriented areas.

If you don't speak the lingo, use the Spanish glossary in the *Appendix*, page 484, to help with some basic requests. If you want to learn Spanish while visiting Guatemala, several towns have excellent schools that offer language education, room and board. These include La Antigua, Panajachel, San Pedro La Laguna, Xela, Cobán, Huehuetenango and the nearby village of Fundación Cuchumatán; recommended schools are listed in the appropriate section.

Guatemala recognizes as official a number of Mayan languages, including Achi', Akateko, Awakateko, Chalchiteko, Ch'orti', Chuj, Itzá, Ixil, Popti', Kaqchikel, K'iche', Mam, Mopán, Poqoman, Poqomchi, Q'anjob'al, Quiché, Sakapulteko, Sipakapense, Spanish, Tekiteko, Tz'utujil, Uspanteko, Garífuna and Xinka.

FOOD

Every region in Guatemala has its own specialty dishes, but the staple of any Maya diet are **beans** and **tortillas**, which are served at every meal. *Frijoles*, kidney-shaped beans, can be cooked in a variety of ways. The most popular method is *refritos*, in which the beans have been boiled, mashed and then refried, or *enteros*, where the beans are served whole in their cooked juices with sliced onions. Breakfast beans are served with a dollop of cream on top.

Tortillas are made from maize, a sturdy variety of corn that is too tough to eat on the cob but, when ground, makes a delicious flour. The flour is shaped into a small round pancake (the best are handmade) and cooked over a flame. A variety of stuffings – such as beans, rice, guacamole, cheese, chicken, beef and pork – are served alongside. Tortillas are best eaten warm. If you get a chance, try the blue corn tortillas, the most delicious of all.

The most popular snacks are **tamales**, flavored cornmeal stuffed with either chicken or pork, wrapped in a banana leaf and then steamed. A good tamale can be a meal in itself and being able to create the perfect tamale is a source of pride among Maya women.

Chile peppers

Chile rellenos are stuffed chile peppers; these are usually filled with cheese, rice and chicken. **Chiles** also show up in a variety of salsas, or can be pickled. Approach anything made with chiles with a certain amount of caution as the average gringo palate is not used to such heat.

Stews and **soups** made with turkey are especially popular in the chilly north. The most popular breakfast in the highlands is ***mosh***, oatmeal cooked with milk and cinnamon.

Traditional breakfasts include eggs, beans, tortillas and coffee. Lunch is the main meal of the day and many restaurants will offer a daily special that consists of soup, roast chicken, rice, beans, tortillas and a drink. This *comida del dia* is the most economical way to eat. Dinner tends to be a smaller meal featuring soups, stews, beans and tortillas. The *Ladino* population seems to prefer hamburgers, pizza, pasta and Chinese food and there are plenty of restaurants to meet their needs.

Vegetarians will have a hard time finding food in the more remote areas. The places that see a lot of tourists will have vegetarian restaurants. In fact, you can gauge how much tourism a place gets by the number of vegetarian restaurants.

DRINKS

You'll be able to take your choice from a variety of soft drinks almost everywhere in Guatemala. Pepsi is battling it out with Coca-Cola and it appears to be winning in popularity. You can also find Sprite and Fanta. Natural fruit drinks, called ***licuados***, are made in almost all the restaurants. *Con agua* means the fruit is blended with water; *con leche* means milk is added. In the colder regions, ***atol*** is offered. This warm, sweet drink is made from rice, oat or corn water sweetened with honey or sugar and a pinch of cinnamon.

No one drinks the local **water** and neither should you. Bottled water is sold under half a dozen brand names; these vary according to the region.

> **TIP:** Make sure the bottle's seal is not broken – there is a sideline business of bottling tap water as purified.

Ice cubes made from purified water usually have a hollow center, but this is not always the case. You don't really need to worry too much about getting pure water; since the locals don't drink tap water, there is always purified water available. If you're in a very remote area with no clean water, boil your water for 20 to 30 minutes to kill bacteria. If your plan includes travel in remote areas, consider bringing water purification tablets, sold at most hiking or outdoor stores.

© Shelagh McNally

Trucks like this one transporting Gallo beer are seen all over Guatemala

There are only two brands of **beer** sold in Guatemala: **Gallo** is the light beer and **Mazo** is the dark beer. The Mexican beer **Tecate** is becoming very popular in the larger cities as well.

Rum is the favored hard liquor, along with *aguadiente* or *guaro*, homemade moonshine. Be careful of this. It has a very high alcohol content and leaves you with a wicked hangover and plenty of dead brain cells. Locally made **wine** is an acquired taste. It tastes more like a sweet sherry. Imported wines are probably a better option.

ASKING FOR DIRECTIONS

When asking for directions, don't rely on a single person for a correct answer. Many Guatemalans won't admit they don't know where the place is because they don't want to seem unhelpful. Instead, they will make directions for you. The rule of thumb is to ask three people and take the best two out of three. If you get three different answers, keep asking until you get a consistent answer.

GUATEMALA
GUATE CHIMALTOS
BELMONT

Los Ocotes
La Aurora
San Felipe
San Miguel
Tatasirire
San José Pinula
Refugio
Mataquescuintla
Colmenas
La Sierra
Los Negros
San Rafael Las Flores
Pino Zapatón
Santa Elena Barillas
Casillas
La Fuente
Ayarza
Nueva Santa Rosa
La Brea
Naranjo
Jumaytepeque
Los Pocitos
Portezuelo
Santa Gertrudis
Obrajuelo
Barberena
Cuilapa
San José Acatempa
Pueblo Nuevo Viñas
Llano Grande
Las Quebradas
Jocotillo
Montezumo
Las Cabezas
La Fila
La Morenita

Travel Information

WHEN TO GO

CLIMATE

Although Guatemala is advertised as the land of eternal spring, it actually has a varied climate. The Highlands have warm days and cool nights, and in the higher altitudes the temperature can fall as low as 32° F (0° C) between December and February. The average annual temperature in this area is between 68° and 76° F (20-25° C). The Petén lowlands, as well as the Pacific and Atlantic coastal regions, have a tropical, hot and humid climate with an average temperature of 83° F (28° C), and heavy rainfall year-round. The Eastern plains are hot and dry, with an average temperature of 86° F (32° C).

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SEASONAL CONCERNS

Guatemala doesn't really have any terrible seasons. There is ***invierno*** (winter) from April to November, followed by ***verano*** (summer) from November through April.

The true **rainy season** starts in June and lasts until the end of September. During this period, the sunny mornings are followed by rain and cloud in the late afternoons. If you don't mind getting up early in the morning to do your sightseeing before the rain, then travel during this season can be great. The biggest problem is roads getting washed out. The more remote areas of Guatemala, particularly Los Altos and El Petén, are often inaccessible during the rainy months, as are many of the more remote ruins in El Petén. If you plan to visit any of these ruins, you should check to see if they can be reached during the rainy season. Contact INGUAT, 4 Calle 4-37, Zone 9, Guatemala City, ☎ 502/2-421-2800 or 2810 (see page 481 for more information) or check with the tour companies handling individual ruins.

Invierno (winter) is a good time to visit since there are fewer tourists, hotel prices are low and there are plenty of bargains around.

Verano (summer) is the best time to visit, when the days are sunny and warm. August gets busy for a few weeks when Italians, Germans and French come over to visit. Of course, the highlands are always chilly, particularly Los Altos and Las Verapaces.

The busiest time in Guatemala is during ***Semana Santa*** (Holy Week). Travelers from Central America, Mexico and South America come to Guatemala to celebrate Easter and enjoy the many festivals. The Passion Plays and pageantry in Antigua are world famous and shouldn't be missed. The area gets very crowded during this time and hotel prices are raised, so plan ahead.

HOLIDAYS & FESTIVALS

Guatemala is a country of fiestas and religious holidays. Integral parts of any fiesta are the music, food and drink. Public and religious holidays are celebrated throughout the country. Government agencies, banks, schools and universities are usually closed on public holidays.

© Shelagh McNally

Each village also has a patron saint and when that saint's day arrives (once a year), the entire village takes a week-long holiday to celebrate with religious processions, parades, dances, music, performances, fireworks and a carnival. Large quantities of liquor are consumed, including *guaro* (white lightening) or *aguadiente* (firewater), a drink made from fermented sugar cane. No fiesta in Guatemala is complete without lots of fireworks – the noisier the better. Marimbas are the favorite instrument, along with harps and drums. Dances play an important part in any fiesta, but especially in the religious feasts. Many of these dances date back to before the Conquest in the 16th century. Some are rooted in Maya traditions, while others have African roots, with Moorish and Iberian influences. Each village has its own special dance and certain villages are famous for their folkloric dances.

Religious holidays are also celebrated with processions of the *cofradias*. Each town has a *cofradia*, a group of men or women elected by the town to uphold the religious traditions that are a blending of the ancient Maya religious practices and Catholicism. Cofradias are responsible for carrying the town's religious icons during the processions that mark these holidays. Many of the traditional Maya holidays and ceremonies are closed to foreigners and you should respect this condition. If you are fortunate enough to see a Maya ritual, then refrain from taking photos and keep a respectful distance.

These fairs are great fun, but you should keep in mind that everything slows down during a fiesta, particularly a saint's day celebration. In smaller, more remote villages, this includes the bus service, since the driver will be out celebrating with his bottle of white lightening. Don't look for peace and quiet during the fiestas either. They are all-night affairs.

The website www.mayaparadise.com/fiestas/fiestas.htm has the most comprehensive list of Guatemalan holidays listed by location and date. You can also contact INGUAT (Instituto Guatemalteco de Turismo/Guatemalan Tourism Board), 4 Calle 4-37, Zone 9, Guatemala City, ☎ 502/2-421-2800, www.guatemala.travel.com.gt.

JANUARY

January 1: **New Year's Day**. People change into new clothes for good luck in the upcoming year. Celebrated throughout the country.

January 6: **Dia de los Tres Reyes Mago** (Feast of the Three Kings) celebrates the visit of the Three Wise Men to the infant Jesus. In some parts of Guatemala this is when children receive their Christmas presents.

January 12-15: **Celebration of the Black Christ** in Esquipulas. Thousands of pilgrims from all over Latin America travel to the city to honor the Black Christ. It is one of the largest religious holidays in Guatemala. This holiday is a blend of Maya and Catholic traditions.

January 19-25: **Feast of San Paulo**, Rabinal, Baja Verapaz. This festival is famous for its traditional Maya dances.

FEBRUARY

February 1-5: **Candelería** (Candlemas). This Catholic holiday commemorates the presentation of the infant Jesus in the temple and is when the candles are blessed for the upcoming year. Traditional fiestas are held throughout the Eastern Plains, most notably in San Pedro, Jalapa.

Carnaval (Carnival). The week before Lent, dances and festivals are held throughout the country. Guatemalans dress in masks and costumes and have a final fling. The most notable is held in Retalhuleu.

MARCH

March/April: **Semana Santa** (Easter Week) is the most important holiday in Latin America, with almost everyone traveling during this period. Each village has its own celebrations, but the largest and most spectacular is held in Antigua.

During Easter there are religious procession and Passion Plays depicting the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus. Various families and religious orders create paintings in the streets made from flowers. The most famous celebrations take place in Antigua and its Good Friday Passion Play is attended by thousands of people. Hotel reservations are a must.

MAY

May 1: **Labor Day** – a day for protests and marches through Guatemala City.

May 2-5: **Santa Cruz** (The Day of the Cross) is celebrated in villages throughout the departments of Alta Verapaz, Huehuetenango, Izabal, Jalapa, Santa Rosa, Quetzaltenango and Lake Amatitlán.

May 9: **Jueves de Ascención** (Ascension Day) at Lake Chicabal is celebrated with flowers, music and prayers.

May 9-14: **San Antonio de Pádua**. St. Anthony is an extremely popular saint celebrated in many villages throughout the country. The most notable celebrations are found in Senahú Alta Verapaz, Purulhá Baja Verapaz, Sayaxche El Petén, San Antonio Aguas Calientes Sacatepéquez and San Antonio Palopó, Sololá.

Mar 10-22: **Feast of San José**. Puerto de San José, Escuintla and San José, El Petén hold week-long celebrations for their patron saint.

© Sam Chadwick

Locals dressed to celebrate the Festa de San Tomas, Chichicastenango

May 21-24. **San Juan Bautista** (St John the Baptist) is another extremely popular saint with many celebrations held throughout Alta Verapaz, Chimaltenango, Huehuetenango, Quetzaltenango, Quiché. Sacatepéquez, Sololá, Suchitepéquez and Zacapa.

JUNE

June 16-22: **Puerto Barrios**, Izabál celebrates its founding with a wild week-long party.

June 30: **Revolution Day**. Held throughout the country, this holiday honors the June 30, 1871 revolt for agrarian reform in which Justo Rufino Barrios overthrew the Conservative president, Vicente Cerna.

JULY

July 25: **Antigua Town Fair**. A celebration with parades, music and festivities.

July 21-25: **Santiago Apóstol**. St. James the Apostle is the patron saint of Guatemala, with many towns named after him. Festivals are held throughout Alta Verapaz, Baja Verapaz, Chimaltenango, Chiquimula, Guatemala City, Huehuetenango, Jalapa, Quetzaltenango, Sacatepéquez, San Marcos, Sololá, Totonicapán.

July 27: **Rabin Ajau**, Cobán, Alta Verapaz. One of the most impressive and largest Maya festivals when hundred of Maya come to watch the traditional folkloric dances, march in the religious processions held by the cofradias and participate in the carnivals. The festival highlight is the crowing of the Rabinal Princess at the Rabin Ajau Beauty Pageant.

AUGUST

August 11-18. **Nuestra Señora del Tránsito** (Our Lady of Movement). Chiquimula holds an excellent fiesta that includes bullfighting and traditional dances.

August 15: **La Virgén de la Asunción** (Ascension Day of the Virgin). Although celebrated throughout the northern highlands as a week-long feast, this day is considered the most important one for Guatemala City since La Virgén is the city's patron saint. Also of note is the festival in Sololá.

SEPTEMBER

September 15: **Independence Day**. The whole of Guatemala celebrates the day of independence from Spain with fireworks, dances and parades. The largest celebration is in Quetzaltenango.

September 22-30: **San Miguel Arcángel** (St Michael the Archangel). This is another extremely popular saint, with celebrations taking place throughout the departments of El Progreso, Alta Verapaz, Baja Verapaz, Chimaltenango, Huehuetenango, Quetzaltenango, Sacatepéquez. San Marcos, Totonicapán and Zacapa.

September 26-October 5: **Feast of San Francisco de Asís**. One of the most respected saints in Guatemala, with many towns named after him. Celebrations take place in the departments of Chimaltenango, Jutiapa, Petén, Quetzaltenango, Sololá, Suchitepéquez, Totonicapán.

October 12: **Day of the Races**. Known in the western world as Columbus Day, this International Latin Holiday celebrates the races of the world.

October 20: **Revolution Day**. The whole of Guatemala celebrates the overthrow of the dictator Jorge Ubico in 1944 and the beginning of the new revolutionary government known as 10 Years of Spring.

NOVEMBER

November 1: **Dios de los Muertos** (Day of the Dead – All Saint's Day). A country-wide celebration where all return to their family villages to remember loved ones who have passed away. Their graves are visited and decorated with flowers along with their favorite food and drink. In Santiago Sacatepéquez (near Antigua), giant kites are flown in the cemeteries, while in Fundación Cuchumatán, there is an annual horse race. This holiday typically starts in the evening of October 31st.

November 25-30: **Feast of Santa Catalina** (Saint Catherine). This patron saint for prevention of fire and sickness is celebrated in villages throughout the departments of Jutiapa, Quetzaltenango, Retalhuleu, San Marcos, Sololá and Suchitepéquez.

November 27-December 1: **Feast of San Andrés Apóstol** (St. Andrew). This popular patron saint is celebrated in the villages with his name in Chimaltenango, Huehuetenango, Petén, Quiché, Retalhuleu, Sololá, Totonicapán.

December 5-8: **Virgén de Concepción** (Virgin Mary of the Conception). Mother Mary is a significant figure for the many Catholic Guatemalans. December 8 coincides with the Mexican feast of the Virgin of Guadalupe and there is some overlap with this holiday. She is considered the mother of all Guatemalans. Celebrations are held throughout the departments of Huehuetenango, Jutiapa, Quetzaltenango, Quiché, Retalhuleu, Sacatepéquez, San Marcos, Santa Rosa, Sololá, Sololá and Suchitepéquez.

December 8: **Quemadas Diablo** (Devil Burning Day). In preparation from the upcoming Christmas season, houses are cleaned and all trash is burnt in front of each house.

December 16-24: **Nine Days Before Christmas**. In the nine days before Christmas houses are decorated with poinsettias, handmade decorations and Nativity scenes. Small processions known as *posadas* go door-to-door singing.

December 21: **Chichicastenango** has its town fair with traditional songs and dance. This starts off the holiday season in this area.

December 24: **Christmas Eve**, known as Noche Buena, is celebrated with a special midnight evening meal where everyone eats tamales and sets off fireworks. There is a special Caribbean carnival with Garifuna music and dance in Lívingston, Izabál. The carnival goes until New Year's Day.

December 25: **Christmas**. A special mass celebrates the day.

December 28: **Day of the Innocents**. Practical jokers are safe from retribution on this day commemorating the slaughter of the children of Bethlehem by King Herod.

Dec 31: **New Year's Eve.** The noisiest holiday in Guatemala, where every village sets off fireworks. The dancing and music fill the streets.

"Toritos" are men who don a cage covered with a massive amount of fireworks that are set off while they dance through the crowd. It's exciting to see but can be dangerous.

MEASUREMENTS

Guatemala recognizes the metric system. Use the calculations given below to make conversions.

GENERAL MEASUREMENTS

1 kilometer	.6124 miles
1 mile	1.6093 kilometers
1 foot	.304 meters
1 inch	2.54 centimeters
1 square mile	2.59 square kilometers
1 pound	.4536 kilograms
1 ounce	28.35 grams
1 imperial gallon	4.5459 liters
1 US gallon	3.7854 liters
1 quart	.94635 liters

TEMPERATURES

For Fahrenheit: Multiply Centigrade figure by 1.8 and add 32.

For Centigrade: Subtract 32 from Fahrenheit figure and divide by 1.8

Centigrade	*Fahrenheit*
40°	104°
35°	95°
30°	86°
25°	77°
20°	64°
15°	59°
10°	50°

MONEY

CURRENCY

The currency is the **quetzal**, named after the famous bird. In June of 2001 the American dollar was also recognized as an official currency. Consequently, it is difficult to exchange any other foreign currency (you have to take it to the National Bank of Guatemala in Guatemala City, which is extremely annoying). You can change money at the airport, but rates are very poor. The solution is to travel with American dollars. If you're traveling overland, you can change Mexican pesos or Belizean dollars at the border with moneychangers who offer decent rates.

At the time of writing, the rate of exchange was Q7.5 to US $1.

CREDIT CARDS & ATMs

Your **ATM** card will work as long as it's linked to a bank system such as Plus or Interact. Many of the ATMs have instructions in Spanish and English. They often run out of money by the afternoon, and on weekends are usually empty. Small towns may not have an ATM and, if they do, it might not work.

TIP: Always keep your receipt since there have been some instances where the machine doesn't deliver the money after taking it out of your account.

VISA credit cards are accepted countrywide at most upscale hotels and restaurants. **MasterCard** is rarely taken and **AMEX** is accepted only in large tourist areas. The easiest **traveler's checks** to cash are from Thomas Barclay. You will have trouble with bank-issued AMEX traveler's checks.

TIPPING & TAXES

You should tip waiters 10-15% and leave the hotel cleaning staff a dollar a day tip. Restaurants charge a 10% IVA (value-added tax), while hotels charge a 10% tourist tax on top of the IVA tax for a whopping 20% addition to your hotel bill.

NOTE: The only place you can barter is in the markets. Shops, restaurants and hotels usually have fixed prices.

CUSTOMS & IMMIGRATION

DOCUMENTS

Visitors from Western Europe, Canada, the USA, Mexico, Central America, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay, Venezuela, Australia, Israel, Japan and New Zealand do not need a visa to enter Guatemala. You must, however, be in possession of a valid passport. The majority of visitors will automatically be given a 90-day tourist visa on arrival (grouchy officials tend to give only 30 days). If you want to stay longer than the length of your visa, apply for an extension in Guatemala City. You must submit a *solicitud de prórroga de visa de turista o visitante* (request for renewal of tourist or visitor visa), which you can download from the Guatemala immigration site at www.migracion.gob.gt/ingles/serv/form/proturvi.pdf. You must present the completed form, an international credit card or sufficient traveler's checks ($1,000 or more in your name), evidence of a round-trip airplane or bus ticket and a signed statement, accompanied by an authenticated photocopy of the personal identification stating your name, nationality, personal identification document number, address, phone, and economic capacity. You must then submit the documents to the Subureau of Foreign Proceedings, 7 Av 1-17, Zona 4, 2nd floor, INGUAT Building, ☎ 502/5-361-8476, fax 502/5-361-8479, www.migracion.gob.gt, from 8-4:30 pm, Mon-Fri (they do close for lunch). They will give you another form that you must take to the bank and pay a fee of Q75 to stamp the form. Then you bring all your forms back to the office so you can be registered in the database system of Immigration Services. If you are not on Guatemala's most wanted list, then the officer will stamp all your papers and issue you another visa. Except to spend at least a day doing all of this – if all goes well. It's such a hassle and colossal waste of time that most people get around the paperwork by simply leaving the country for a day and re-entering to get a new visa. Make sure you ask for an entry stamp on your passport because without one you will be forced to pay a large fine (or bribe) to leave the country.

If you leave by plane there is a whopping Q237 exit fee, or **departure tax** (US $30 per person); if you leave by land, the exit fee is Q10, about a $1.50 per person. Most locals leave the country by bus, which is the reason for the huge difference. There is no entry fee into the country.

> **TIP:** Take photocopies of your passports and other valuable documents to carry with you. Leave the originals in your hotel safe.

Try to change only small amounts of cash at border crossings and allow enough time to cross over during the day. Border posts along the El Salvador border tend to close at night.

GETTING HERE

OVERLAND

The majority of travelers arrive in Guatemala overland via Mexico or Belize. There are three main border stations from Mexico: Ciudad Cuauhtemoc/La Mesilla in Huehuetenango; Tapachula/El Carmen in San Marcos; and Ciudad Hidalgo/Ciudad Tecún Umán in San Marcos. The most convenient route is through Tecún Umán. The road from Huehuetenango (the Pan American Highway) is really mountainous and travel is slow going. There are direct buses from the border to Guatemala City and certain tourist shuttles offer rides to and from San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico.

SHUTTLES FROM ANTIGUA TO MEXICO

Monarca Travel, 6a Av Norte #6-A, ☎/fax 502/7-832-4305, monarcas@conexion.com.gt. This company also offers shuttle service from San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico to Antigua Guatemala. Tickets start at $40 per person and include help with border crossings.

Sin Fronteras, 5a Av Norte #15A, ☎ 502/7-832-1017, fax 502/7-832-8453, offers a special bus pass to and from Mexico for up to 14 days starting at $94.

You will need to make reservations for the shuttle buses.

PUBLIC BUSES FROM GUATEMALA CITY TO THE MEXICAN BORDER

Public Buses leave regularly from Guatemala City for the Mexican border in Tecun Umán, San Marcos:

Galgos leaves from 7 Av 19-44, Zona 1, at 7 am to 1:30 pm.

Fortalezas leaves from 19 Av 0-70, Zona 1, 2:30 am to 6:30 pm every hour.

Rapidos del Sur leaves from 20 Av 6-55, Zona 1, 2:30 am to 6:30 pm every half-hour.

Rutas Lima leaves from 6a Calle 8-63, Zona 1, 5:30 am to 4:30 pm every hour.

Velasquez leaves from 20 Calle 2a Av, Zona 1, 5:30 am to 4:30 pm every hour.

Tacana leaves from 2a Av 20-42, Zona 1, 5:30 am to 4:30 pm every hour.

Only one main line handles the trip from the capital to La Mesilla, Huehuetenango:

Transportes Velázquez leaves from 20 Calle and 2a Av, Zona 1, 1, 2:30 am to 6:30 pm every hour.

Tickets will be about US $15 per person. No reservations are allowed.

BUSES FROM CHIAPAS, MEXICO TO LA MESILLA, HUEHUETENANGO

UNO, ☎ 52-51-5133-2424 or toll-free throughout Mexico, 800/702-8000, www.uno.com.mx.

Colon Cristobal, toll-free in Mexico, ☎ 800/849-6136.

ADO, ☎ 51-55-533-2424 or toll-free in Mexico, 800/702-8000.

Prices will vary according to the bus line, but tickets usually start at around $30 to get to the border. Your seat is guaranteed when you buy a ticket and reservations can be made online.

If you are entering Guatemala from Belize, take a bus from the border town of Melchor de Mercos to Flores. At Flores you will have to transfer to another bus that will carry you east to Río Dulce and on to Guatemala City. You will need to transfer a second time if you are heading to Antigua.

PUBLIC BUSES FROM GUATEMALA TO FLORES

Buses leave at 4:30am, 8:30 am, 8:30 pm.

La Petenera leaves from 16 Calle 10-03, Zona 1.

Lineas Maxima leaves from 5a Av 17-26, Zona 1.

Maya Express leaves from 17 Calle 9-36, Zona 1.

Fuentes de Norte leaves from 17 Calle 17-01, Zona 1.

Prices start at US $8 per person.

SHUTTLE SERVICES TO FLORES

You have the option of leaving from Antigua or Guatemala to get to Flores. You must make reservations for the shuttles and they will pick you up at your hotel.

Adventure Travel Center	☎ 502/7-832-0162
Horizantes	☎ 502/7-832-1530
Monarca Travel	☎ 502/7-832-4305
Open Tours	☎ 502/7-832-7599
Vision Travel	☎ 502/7-832-3293

FIRST CLASS EXPRESS SERVICE FROM GUATEMALA CITY TO FLORES

This private bus services offer some very good deals on travel to the border with first-class service aboard well-equipped buses as far as Flores. From Belize and onwards the service is strictly second class.

Fuentes del Norte, 17 Calle 17-01 Zona 1. 3:20 am until 2 pm every hour. US $18 per person.

Linea Dorada, Main Bus Terminal, Zona 4, ☎ 502/2-220-7990, or their Flores office, ☎ 502/7-926-0528, for reservations, 9 am and 10 pm. You can make arrangements to travel as far as Chetumal, Mexico on this line.

FROM CHETUMAL MEXICO TO FLORES, PETÉN

Mundo Maya has a bus leaving the Main Terminal, Chetumal City to Flores leaving every day at 6 am and 3 pm for US $22 per person. You can also catch this bus in Belize City. ☎ 51-55-533-2424 or toll-free in Mexico, 800/702-8000.

FROM BELIZE CITY TO FLORES

You can pick up any of the Mexican buses going into Flores in Mexico City. You can also contact:

Batty Brothers Bus Line, ☎ 501/2-72025 or 73929 for more details on schedules and reservations. They change frequently.

CUSTOMS RIP-OFFS

Gangs of sleazy guys hang out around the borders offering to be your "friend" and help you get through Customs or change money. They may pretend to be border officials and ask for a Q70 ($9) fee. Don't pay them and don't let them help you. They often end up stealing your documents or money. If you need assistance, go into the Customs office where the genuine officials will help for free. No Customs official will ever ask for money.

If you want exchange money, look for men with money pouches or with money wedged in between their fingers (each finger holds a different currency). These moneychangers offer good rates and are fairly honest.

BY AIR

All international flights land at **La Aurora International Airport** in Zona 13 in the southeastern part of Guatemala City. Taxis wait outside the terminal on the Arrivals level. Taxi rates are set and are quite reasonable: US $7 to Zona 9 or 10, US $10 for Zona 1 to the bus terminal. (See the *Walking* section on page 74 for details on the city's various *zonas*.)

Guatemala is well serviced by a number of airlines:

Aerolineas Argentinas, 10a Calle 3-17, Zona 10, Nivel 1, Edificio Aseguradora General, ☎ 502/2-331-1567; fax 502/2-334-6662.

AeroMexico, 10a Calle 6-21 "A," Zona 9, Nivel 3, ☎ 502/2-331-9507; fax 502/2-334-3313, discover-guate@guate.net.

Air Canada, 18 Calle 5-56, Zona 10, Edificio Unicentro, Nivel 3 y 7, ☎ 502/2-366-9985; fax 502/2-366-6415.

Air France, Av la Reforma 9-00, Zona 9, Plaza Panamericana, Planta Baja, ☎ 502/2-334-0043/5; fax 502/2-331-1918.

Air New Zealand, Av la Reforma 9-00, Zona 9, Plaza Panamericana, No. 8, ☎ 502/2-331-2070; fax 502/2-331-2079.

American Airlines, Av la Reforma 15-54, Zona 9, Edificio Reforma Obelisco, No. 401-A, ☎ 502/2-334-7379; fax 502/2-360-6084.

British Airways, 1a Av 10-81, Zona 10, Edificio Inexa, Nivel 6, ☎ 502/2-332-3402 al 4, fax 502/2-332-7401.

Cathay Pacific, 10a Calle 60-21 "A," Zona 9, Nivel 3, ☎ 502/2-331-9507, fax 502/2-334-3313

Continental Airways, 18 Calle 5-56, Zona 10, Edificio Unicentro, Niveles 3 y 7, ☎ 502/2-366-9985, fax 502/2-331-2055.

Delta Airlines, 15 Calle 3-20, Zona 10, Edificio Centro Ejecutivo, Nivel 2, Oficina 201, ☎ 502/2-337-0642/70/80/88, fax 502/2-337-0588.

Iberia (Lineas Aereas de España), Edificio Galería Reforma, Av la Reforma 8-60, Zona 9, ☎ 502/2-332-0911, fax 502/2-334-3715.

KLM, Edificio Plaza Marítima, 6a Av 20-25, Zona 10, ☎ 502/2-367-6179, fax 502/2-337-0227.

Lan Chile, Av la Reforma 9-00, Zona 9, Edificio Plaza Panamericana, No. 8, ☎ 502/2-331-2070, fax 502/2-331-2079.

Lufthansa, Diagonal 6 10-01, Zona 10, Nivel 8, Centro Comercial, Las Margaritas, Torre II, ☎ 502/2-336-5526, fax 502/2-339-2994.

United Airlines, Av la Reforma 1-50, Zona 9, Edificio El Reformador, Nivel 2, Oficina 201-202, Nivel 3, Oficina 301-302, ☎ 502/2-332-2995, fax 502/2-332-3766.

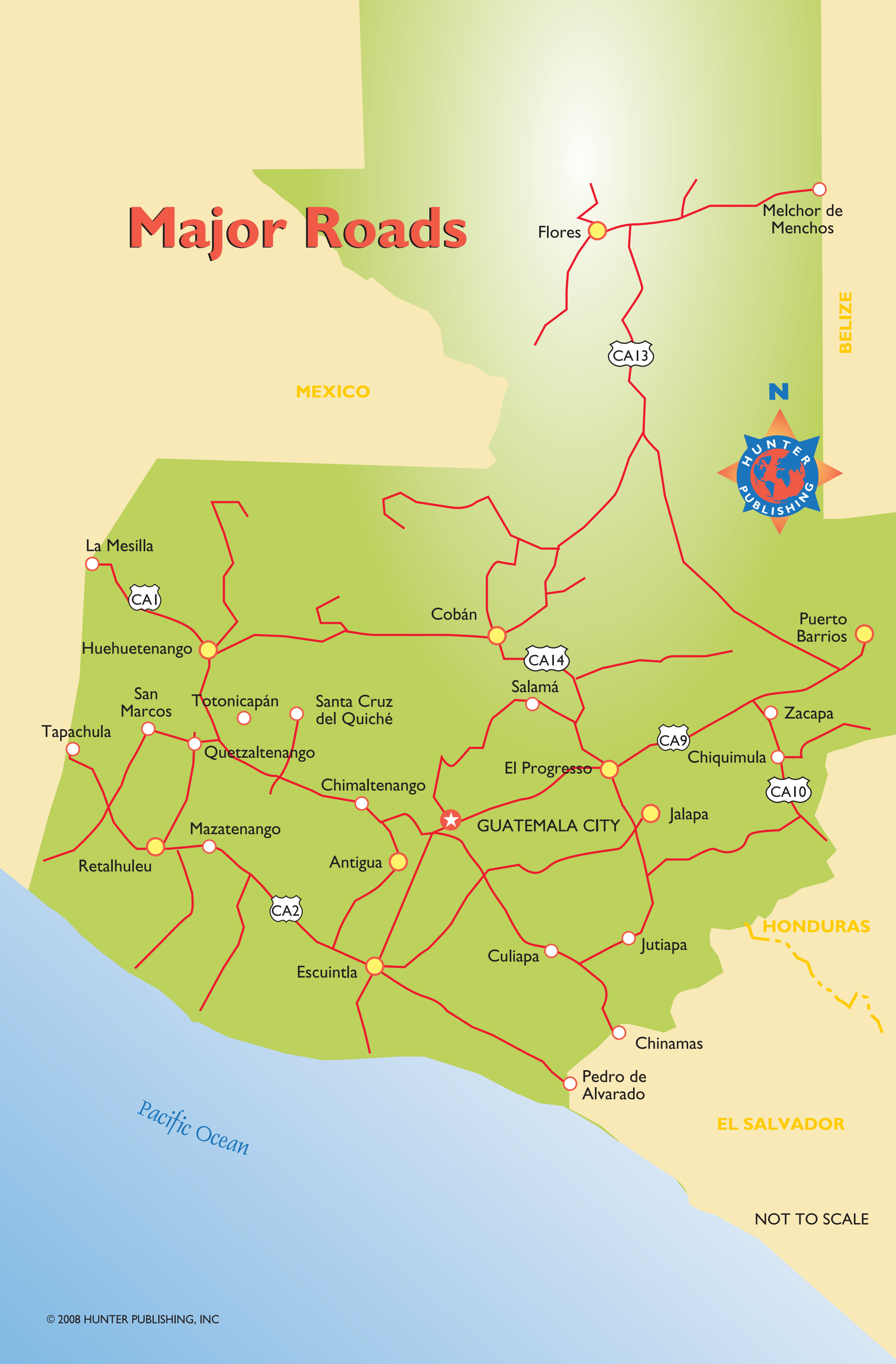
US Airways, 10a Calle 6-21 "A," Zona 9, Nivel 3, ☎ 502/2-331-9507, fax 502/2-334-3313.

GETTING AROUND

BY AIR

There are a number of airline companies that service Guatemala internally. The most popular route is the one from Guatemala City to Tikal. Although there are other routes offered, they are quite unreliable since they are not frequent, are often overbooked or cancelled at the last minute. Aside from the Aurora Airport, the only other modern airport is in Flores. Most of the domestic airlines offer at least one trip per week to Tikal, with the exception of Tikal Airlines, which has daily flights. The domestic airlines all have offices at the Aurora Airport. Below are the airlines currently flying locally in Guatemala:

Major Roads


Flores
Melchor de Menchos
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La Mesilla
CA1
Huehuetenango
Cobán
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Zacapa
CA9
Chiquimula
El Progresso
Chimaltenango
CA10
GUATEMALA CITY
Jalapa
Mazatenango
Retalhuleu
Antigua
CA2
HONDURAS
Escuintla
Culiapa
Jutiapa
Chinamas
Pedro de Alvarado
Pacific Ocean
EL SALVADOR
NOT TO SCALE

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Aero Ruta Maya, Av Hincapié 18-05, Zona 13, ☎ 502/2-360-4917/20

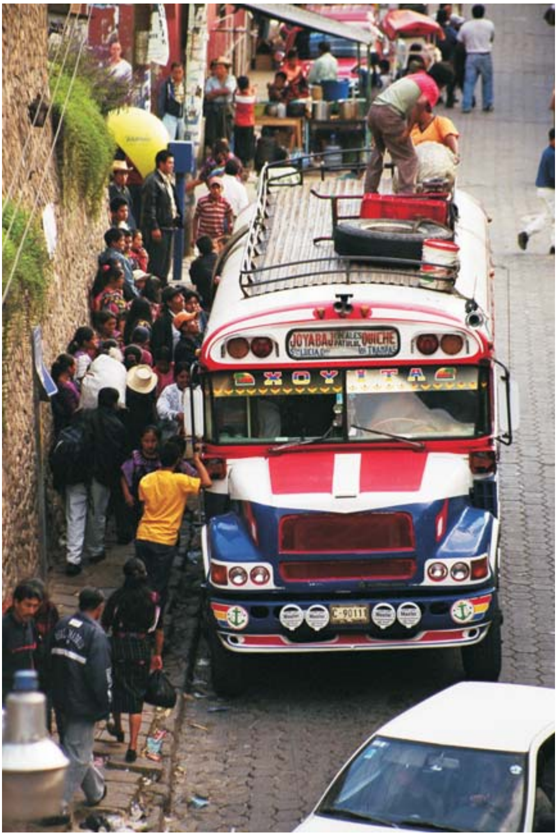
Grupo Taca (Aeroquetzal/Aviateca/Lacsa), Av Hincapié 12-22, Zona 13, ☎ 502/2-361-2144

Racsa, SA, Av Hincapié and 18 Calle, Zone 13, ☎ 502/2-361-7056

TAG (Transportes Aereos Guatemaltecos), Av Hincapié and 18 Calle, Zona 13, ☎ 502/2-360-3038

Tikal Airlines, Av Hincapié and 18 Calle, Zona 13, ☎ 502/2-334-5568

BY BUS


Typical brightly painted chicken bus

There are two kinds of buses in Guatemala: public and private.

Public buses are known as "chicken buses" since they accept livestock as well as people. Fares are dirt cheap and the buses go anywhere, no matter how remote or how bad the roads. They are also incredibly uncomfortable, since most are refurbished school buses. A second-class chicken bus is one with no missing parts, seats still bolted to the floor and windows that sometimes open. Third-class buses are those that should have been condemned but haven't stopped running. All buses are kept very clean, no matter how old.

Shiny bus by a crumbling wall, La Antigua
(© Shelagh McNally)

BUS SAFETY

Unfortunately, chicken buses attract **thieves**. Keep your valuables next to your body in some kind of money pouch. Never put anything valuable or breakable in your luggage. Use a generic, inexpensive bag to avoid having your good one stolen. If you are going on a day-trip, leave your passport and money in the hotel safe and bring photocopies of your important papers. Avoid traveling at night on chicken buses, since that is the most dangerous time. Generally, you are safe in more rural areas, but avoid using the bus in bigger cities and tourist areas. Fortunately, these areas have plenty of tourist shuttles as an alternative.

You pay for a **ticket** when you are *on* the chicken bus. A recent rip-off has involved ticket sellers who stand outside the buses and sell you fake tickets as you board. Of course, the bus driver won't take the fake ticket – you won't know the difference – and you will have to pay a second time. All buses have an official seller who collects fares and provides tickets once the bus is on its way. Bus travel is cheap. Short runs will cost $1-$5; longer routes, $8-$12.

Something you will never hear from a chicken bus driver is "sorry, we are full." Drivers will cram as many people into a bus as humanely possible – and then some. Expect to rub elbows, hips, thighs and other unexpected body parts with the locals while traveling on a chicken bus. There are usually three or four people to a seat and sometimes you will end up holding the odd parcel (or chicken) for your neighbor. It's always an adventure riding a chicken bus and it's a great way to meet the locals. To explore the more remote areas of Guatemala, you will need to travel by chicken bus. A short chicken bus ride is fun, but the long hauls can be nightmarish, particularly on roads with the hairpin turns. Chicken bus drivers don't slow down for anything.

For a fun read, pick up a copy of Vivien Lougheed's ***Central America by Chicken Bus***. It's out of print, but worth finding a used copy for sheer entertainment value. At last check, used copies were available at www.amazon.com.

Another type of chicken bus are the ***colectivos*** or micro-buses. These are passenger vans that do short, frequent runs between villages. They are very inexpensive and are used primarily by workers heading to the local *fincas* or to town. You will still be crammed in, but with fewer people. You can flag down *collectivos* on any road. In the more remote areas, pick-up trucks act as the *collectivos* and you will be crammed in the back of the truck standing up.

© Shelagh McNally

Colectivo, *Xela*

Chicken bus schedules are subject to change without notice for a variety of reasons. Breakdowns are frequent and during the rainy season the roads may get washed out. Fiestas are another reason for delays, as bus drivers will often join in on the party and not be able to drive the next day. There is nothing you can do except enjoy your surroundings and be patient. Delays are part of travel in Guatemala.

Guatemala's **private, first-class buses** run less frequently than chicken buses. If you have a long journey, I recommend booking a seat on a first-class bus. They are regular-size buses with one seat per person, bathrooms and windows that work. The run from Guatemala City to Flores even has a "luxury" bus, with stewards who offer fresh complimentary coffee and snacks, comfy seats with pillows, blankets and Hollywood movies. The drivers appear to be sane as well.

Private companies also offer shuttle services, which are **mini-vans**. They keep regular schedules and you get a seat all to yourself. They aren't as much fun, but they are certainly quicker and more comfortable than the other options. They are expensive when compared to chicken buses and, if you are traveling on a budget, they can eat up your cash quickly. But for those long hauls the shuttle is sometimes the only way to go. Reservations are recommended. Contact the companies below to book your place.

SHUTTLE SERVICES

A number of companies offer shuttle services in and around Guatemala City, Copán Honduras, Panajachel, Chichicastenango and the surrounding areas. The companies listed below are all based in Guatemala City.

Adventure Travel Center Viareal, SA, 5a Av Norte #25B, ☎/fax 502/7-832-0162, viareal@guate.net.

Authentico Paraiso Maya, 5a Calle Poniente #6, ☎ 502/7-832-2071, paraisomaya@yahoo.com.

Mayan Paradise Tour and Travel Service, 5a Calle Poniente #6, ☎ 502/7-832-2071, fax 502/832-1838, paraisomaya@yahoo.com.

Monarca Travel, 6a Av Norte #6A, ☎/fax 502/7-832-4305, monarcas@conexion.com.gt. This company also offers shuttle service from San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico to Antigua Guatemala. Tickets start at US $40 per person and include help with border crossings.

Rain Forest, 4a Av Norte #4A, ☎ 502/832-5670, fax 502/7-832-6299, www.rainforest.guate.com.

Sin Fronteras, 5a Av Norte #15A, ☎ 502/832-1017, fax 502/7-832-8453, www.sinfront.com.

Turansa, 9a Calle (inside Hotel Villa Antigua), ☎ 502/7-832-2928, fax 502/832-4692, www.turansa.com.

Vision Travel, 3 Av Norte #3, ☎ 502/832-3293 or 1962, fax 502/7-832-1955, www.guatemalainfo.com.

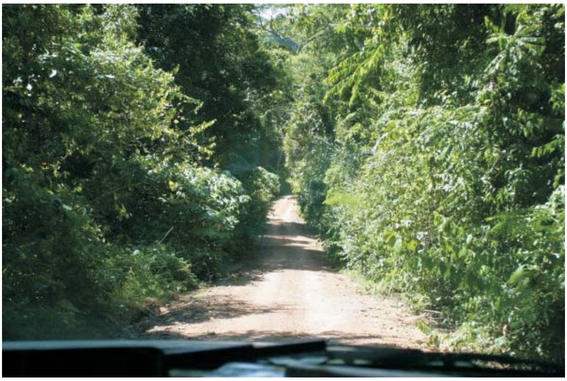
HITCHHIKING

Everyone hitchhikes in Guatemala at some time. In remote areas, such as Los Altos, Quiché or Las Verapaces, hitching is sometimes the only way to get around. Rides are not free, though, and you will be expected to pay the same price as for a bus ticket – ranging from about 50¢ to a few dollars. Sometimes, truck drivers will overcharge tourists by a few dollars. If you argue the point they will usually back down.

The only place it isn't safe to hitchhike is through El Petén. Take the bus in that department. Women should never hitchhike alone.

BY CAR

Renting a car gives you freedom and more time to explore. If you proceed with caution and don't drive long distances, you will be fine.



Some dirt roads require a 4WD

Guatemala measures distances and speeds in kilometers. The average speed on the highway ranges between 50 and 65 mph (80-100 kmph), but you may want to go slower through the mountain roads. The small white crosses you see on the roads mark where someone has died in a car accident.

There are plenty of car rental companies in Guatemala with good selections of cars, 4WD trucks and minivans. The best prices and selection are found at the international airport in Guatemala and at the Flores Airport in Petén. Prices start at between US $35 and $50 per day, usually with some kind of distance allowance known as "kilometraje." Read your contract carefully for the small print and make you check the car before leaving the rental office. Many of the insurance policies offered do not cover damage to your vehicle. The largest rental companies are **Hertz**, ☎ 502/2-470-3737; **Thrifty**, ☎ 502/2-332-1130; and **Budget Rent a Car**, ☎ 502/2-334-8352.

Most cars have standard gear shift. If you must have an automatic, request it ahead of time. If you want to explore off the beaten path, you should invest in a four-wheel-drive vehicle. Before you head off into the wilds, be sure to check road conditions, particularly during the rainy season. There are no local tow trucks and no AAA in Guatemala. If you get stuck in a remote area, you are on your own.

DRIVING SAFETY

Parking and **security** can be problematic in urban areas. Never park on the street, even in broad daylight. Robbers have perfected the art of smashing a window and grabbing anything within reach. Always use a car park with security and don't leave any valuables inside. **Carjacking** and **highway robberies** are becoming more of a problem, to the point where the US State Department is recommending that you caravan, that is, travel together in a group of cars. Depending on your travel plans, this may not be a practical option. You can also arrange for security escorts from the Tourist Assistance Office, ASISTUR, ☎ 1500 or call the POLITUR (tourist police) at ☎ 502/2-361-605. The best precaution is to stay on the main highways and travel during the day.

DRIVING TIPS

Driving is a challenge. **Defensive driving** is a must and you need to stay alert. There is no driver's education here, so there are plenty of bad drivers who don't use signals, tailgate and weave in and out of traffic. Stop signs, speed limits and traffic lights are frequently ignored. If you are not going fast, some drivers will start to tailgate while leaning on their horn and shining the high beams in your mirror. Maintain your cool. Unfortunately, tailgaters are often found on winding one-lane highways passing through the steep mountains. If someone is being really aggressive, pull over and let them pass. Don't try to challenge the road machos here. It's not worth ruining your vacation.

Another annoyance are the **diesel buses** and **trucks**. After about 10 minutes of following one of these stinky trucks you will probably start to feel sick from the fumes. Fortunately, truck and bus drivers are really co-operative. If they see you want to pass, they will blink their lights to let you know it is safe to pass. But proceed with caution because this signal also can mean they are about to stop, change lanes or turn.

The main highways are fairly well maintained, which means potholes the size of small meteors have been fixed, leaving holes just small enough to rip out your transmission. The Inter-American Highway (CA-1) and the road from Guatemala City to the Caribbean coast (CA-9) are dangerous due to heavy traffic, including large trucks and trailers. The Pacific Highway is also dangerous due to the many drunk drivers coming back from partying at the beach.

EMERGENCY HELP: There are no emergency roadside services, but you can contact the police by dialing 110 or 120, and the fire department at 122 or 123.

RULES OF THE ROAD

- Don't drive at **night**.
- **Drinking** and driving is against the law. If you are involved in an accident and have been drinking, you go directly to jail and stay there until a judge has determined who pays for the damages. A re-enactment of the accident will have to be performed in order for the judge to make his decision. This process can take up to two years to complete. Plenty of time to perfect your Spanish with your cell mates.
- Always get **insurance**. It's not required by law, but if you are involved in an accident and injure or kill a Guatemalan, you will be responsible for damages to the whole family.
- A valid US driver's **license** is acceptable ID to rent a car. You may also want to get an international driver's license since traffic officers seem to prefer them.
- Always carry your **license**, a photocopy of your **passport** and **car rental agreement** with you. All personal documents, including vehicle registration, are private property and may not be kept by the police for any reason. If a police officer insists on keeping the documents, ask that he escort you to the nearest police station to clear up the problem.
- Guatemala's road safety authorities are the Department of Transit and the Joint Operations Center of the National Police. You can contact them by dialing 110 or 120.
- Turning **right on red** is not permitted unless otherwise posted.
- Drivers must **yield** when entering a traffic circle. Those in the inner circle have right of way.
- Adults must wear **seat belts**, but they are optional for children.
- It's against the law to drive and use a **cellular phone** at the same time.
- If you are involved in an **accident**, don't move the car and wait until your insurance representative arrives before signing anything or giving out information.

BY TAXI

Taxis are plentiful. Every small village will have some kind of vehicle operating as a taxi, even if it is someone's personal truck or van. Taxis are a good option if you want to visit a ruin or other site where there is no regular bus service. Always settle on the price before you get into the cab.

In larger urban areas the driver must carry an ID card and must use the meter for trips less than seven miles (12 km). For longer trips, you'll need to negotiate the fare beforehand.

Don't flag down a cab in Guatemala City. Instead, phone for one from your hotel or restaurant. That way, it can be traced if there's a problem. Gypsy cabs often roam the streets looking for tourists to rob.

STAYING IN TOUCH

TELEPHONES

The entire country uses area code 502. **Telgua** is the telephone monopoly – there are no alternatives. All phones work with a calling card which can be bought in increments of 20, 30, 50 or 100 quetzals. These is the cheapest way to call home, since you can dial direct.

You may be able to use your private calling card purchased in the States, but check with the issuing company before leaving for any special codes. Most calling cards follow the same procedure: you dial the international access number for the country, entry your card number and follow the instructions.

Calling collect from Guatemala is very expensive, with rates starting at $1 per minute. A cheaper alternative is to find the local Telgua calling office and rent a booth where you pay by the minute to talk in relative privacy. While the rates are slightly more expensive than using a calling card, the booths are quiet and usually air-conditioned.

You can make international phone calls from many of the Internet cafés.

CELL PHONES

Like any other Latin American country, the mobile phone market has become quite active. Over 75% of the world's population has a cell phone, and Guatemala is no exception. If you plan to spend most of your time in the larger urban centers, such at Antigua and Guatemala City, bring your cell phone with you and buy a SIM card (relatively cheap, about Q25 or US $3) that will give you a Guatemalan phone number and convert your phone for use in the country.

Three main companies sell cell phones, services and pre-paid calling cards. **Telefonica** is least expensive for national calls, with phones costing up to Q400 with 80 minutes air time included. **Claro**, owned by Telgua, has the best coverage but the most expensive rates. Phones cost Q500 and calls are Q1/min within Guatemala and Q4/min to the USA. **Tigo** is moderately priced and offers decent coverage.

E-MAIL

Just about every village has some kind of Internet café. Larger cities have one every couple of blocks. Most are equipped with fast machines with good connections. Prices vary, but except to pay between Q3 and Q8 per hour. Some cafés even have food, music and long-distance telephone services.

SNAIL MAIL

Regular mail is fairly reliable, although slower than North American services. Efficiency and swiftness is in direct proportion to the population and location. But every village has a main post office (Correo Central) open daily from 8 am to 4 pm. Don't bother sending anything important through the mail (that includes checks and credit card numbers). If you want a letter to arrive quicker, spend the extra quetzals and send it via Express Service. If your mail is going outside of the country, be sure to mark it "Correo Aereo" (Airmail).

You can receive mail in any village by having your letters addressed to your full name, followed by Lista de Correo, the village name,Guatemala, Central America. This system is most reliable in Guatemala City.

For really important documents, use a courier service. **DHL**, ☎ 502/2-379-1111, has offices in Antigua, Escuintla, Guatemala City, Mazatenango and Quetzaltenango. **Fedex**, ☎ 1-801-FedEx, has five offices in Guatemala City. **UPS**, ☎ 502/2-360-6460, has one office in Guatemala City.

ACCOMMODATIONS

CONSIDERATIONS

There is an amazing range of accommodations in Guatemala. More expensive places list themselves as hotels, lodges and resorts, while budget hotels are the *pensiones*, *posadas* and *hospedajes*. By law, every hotel must post its rates, but this doesn't necessarily mean they will follow them. If you sign into their ledger, then a 20% tax will be added to your bill. Most budget hotels prefer to just take your money and give you a key. The more expensive hotels will ask you to register. All hotels must keep a comment book and make it available to any customer. The more reputable hotels will leave the book out for you to look through. Others keep it tucked away. Reading the comments can be a quick way to figure out the good, the bad and the ugly about your hotel.

Prices range from under US $10 to over US $150 per night. Rates quoted are per person. Rates are doubled for two people and are usually $10 or 15% more for a third person. Prices are higher in tourist areas.

Hot water is always a big problem. Budget hotels will advertise hot water, although they rarely provide water that is more than lukewarm. Moderate hotels usually have hot water, but you may have to ask the owner to turn the water heater on. High-end hotels have an endless supply.

TIPS FOR BUDGET TRAVELERS

- Bring a lightweight sleeping bag for travel in remote areas. Often, budget hotels are the only option and they don't supply linens.
- Don't settle for the first budget hotel you see. Check out two or three and pick the best one. For a few dollars more you can always find something nicer.
- Always ask to see a couple of rooms.
- Check the bed before paying for the room. Sometimes the beds are done up nicely but are soft as butter or lumpy.
- Ask if there are specific times for hot water.
- Bring a small lock to put on your door. Budget hotels have pathetic locks that can be easily snapped off. If you are traveling with someone, share a combination lock so you don't have to worry about keys.
- Don't leave valuables in your room.

HOTEL RATES

Prices fluctuate. The smaller, more local places tend to post their rates in quetzals, while the more tourist-oriented hotels will post their prices in US dollars. When you see prices in US dollars, you can be almost certain that the prices are higher. The smaller hotels, especially those in the more remote areas, will only deal in local currency. They do no accept credit cards and if you insist on paying with American dollars your rate of exchange will be lousy. If you plan to travel to the more remote areas, bring small denominations of quetzals.

Reservations are not needed for the most part *unless* you are planning to travel during a very busy season such as to Antigua during Holy Week or to Esquipulas during the January dedications to the Black Christ. Hotels also fill up during the annual patron saint celebrations, so you should check to find out whether your intended village has anything happening before you head out.

PERSONAL SAFETY

Sadly, the crime rate is rising. Since 2006, several thousand murders were committed, and while most were drug- and gang-related, there have been some attacks against tourists. Guatemala and the Petén department remain the most dangerous for violent crimes like armed robbery, carjacking and rape. La Aurora Airport tends to attract petty criminals who like to rob tourists of their wallets and money, particularly in the early morning. Certain sections of the Pacific Highway have been plagued with highway bandits.

AREAS OF CONCERN

- **Zone 1** in Guatemala City is a particular problem. In general, you should avoid walking at night anywhere in the city.
- Trips to **Tikal National Park** should be done only with official guides or organized tour groups, especially if traveling to the less-visited areas. Nearby **Biotopo Cerro Cahui** (close to Hotel Camino Real in Petén) has also become a problem.
- The **Godinez Road** to Panajachel should be avoided since there have been reports of armed robbery. Many of the smaller, dirt roads around **Lake Atitlán** have become unsafe for foreigners. Take the Pan-American Highway (CA-1) via Sololá instead.
- Armed robberies at night have started to take place along the **Pacific Coast Highway** (CA-2) and the **Atlantic Highway** (CA-9).
- Do not hike in the **Pacaya** and **Agua volcano** areas without a reputable guide.
- Several rapes and robberies have taken place at **Cerro de la Cruz** just outside of downtown Antigua, so don't go there unaccompanied.
- Women should not walk alone along the local beaches in Livingston. **Playa Blanca** should be avoided altogether unless you have a guide. Hiring a guide to the local attraction of **Las Siete Altares** is also recommended.
- There have been several early morning robberies at **Aurora International Airport**, most frequently between 6 and 10 am. The most common scenario is to hold up tourists or business travelers as their vehicle departs the airport.

LEAVE IT AT HOME

In this extremely poor country every gringo looks wealthy. Expensive electronics, designer clothes and luggage, gold and diamond jewelry are all coveted items.

- Leave your ultra-expensive digital or video **camera** at home. Bring a cheaper camera with you so you won't need grief counseling if it gets stolen. Guatemala has many fine photographers selling beautiful postcards and prints.
- Nothing screams *rich gringo* like expensive **jewelry**, so leave the gold and diamonds at home. There is no one to impress here and you will have a more relaxed trip.
- Don't use expensive **designer luggage** and backpacks. Choose a plain, sturdy and somewhat anonymous bag instead.
- Unless you plan to give them away, leave **designer sweatshirts**, T-shirts and running shoes at home. Making a fashion statement is a waste of time here. The more discreet you look, the easier time you will have.
- Currently, the most popular items for robberies are **laptops** and **MP3 players**.

FEMINISM – A NEW CONCEPT

Woman traveling should use tourist shuttles, travel in groups and not go out alone at night. They should *never* go into any of the bars or *cantinas* catering to men.

Rape is still not considered a crime here, and the woman is often blamed if such an event takes place. In smaller towns, act demurely and dress modestly. Maya women don't even show ankles; if you are dressed in the current American styles, you will be branded as a *puta* (whore). Usually, Maya men will avoid you, but *Ladino* men may think you are loose and make passes at you.

Never go **topless** anywhere, anytime. It's just not done in this conservative country.

Unfortunately, gringo women have the reputation of being loose. Blonde women are particularly prone to being harassed. In a land of jet-black hair, blonde is anyone with light to medium brown hair, and having a *rubio* girlfriend has become a potent sexual fantasy for many *Ladino* men. If you have a persistent admirer whom you need get rid of, tell him he must be more respectful because you're either a mother or not "THAT" kind of girl. It's an old-fashioned ploy, but it works. If you want to head off the beaten track, consider traveling with a companion.

> **TIP:** The website www.journeywoman.com is an excellent resource if you are planning to travel solo.

All these restrictions are frustrating, but the reality is that feminism hasn't made it this far south and women are still considered inferior. Save your breath; feminist rants will fall on deaf ears.

TRAVEL WARNINGS

Violence in Guatemala is sporadic. There are lots of rumors and exaggerations; the best source of information is your local embassy (they often exaggerate as well) or public bulletin boards that post warnings from other travelers. Talk to the ex-pats you meet or fellow travelers – they will know if there are any problem areas to avoid. The locals, including the INGUAT tourist board, often will not mention the problems for fear of chasing away much needed tourism.

See the *Appendix*, page 477, for a full list of Guatemalan embassies in the US and Canada.

Violent crimes involving physical harm seem to be restricted to Guatemala City and El Petén. Guatemala City has two million people and is like any other modern urban area. El Petén, however, is a special case. This area has lots of tourists who come to admire the many Maya ruins, including the famous Tikal. But it also has the largest population of desperately poor people. Most of them are honest and hard working; the robberies are usually committed by a handful of thugs. There is also spill-over crime from Belize, which is currently experiencing an epidemic of crimes against tourists. For that reason, Lívingston has become a hot spot for robberies.

In Antigua, Panajachel, Chichicastenango and Lake Atitlán, hotel robberies and pickpocketing are the biggest worries. The petty thieves won't hurt you if you just hand over the money and don't resist. Afterwards, go to the tourist police. They can be found at the local INGUAT office. Or the local police will refer you to the tourist police. They will be very sympathetic and will help you file a police report. Don't expect to get any of your valuables back. Don't take getting robbed personally and try to be forgiving. Most criminals here are desperately poor and angry about it.

Of the thousands of travelers who visit, only a small percentage have trouble. The majority of Guatemalans are kind, helpful and trustworthy. Don't be paranoid, just cautious.

STAYING HEALTHY

A full range of modern medical care is available in Guatemala City, but medical care outside the city is limited. Most villages will have some kind of health clinic, sometimes without a doctor. For anything of a serious nature, you will have to go to Guatemala City. The state hospitals are extremely crowded and often suffer from a shortage of supplies and medicine. You will be better off in a private hospital. The care will be more than adequate for most common illnesses and injuries. However, doctors often expect to be paid upfront in cash before proceeding. Do not hesitate to contact your embassy to ask for their help in translating for you.

If you are planning to do any serious adventure activities you should have medical insurance with overseas coverage, including provision for medical evacuation. Check to see if your policy covers you.

HOSPITALS IN GUATEMALA CITY

PRIVATE

You will have to prove you have sufficient funds to pay for treatment before most of these hospitals will even give you an appointment.

Hospital de las Americas, 10a Calle 2-31, Zona 14, ☎ 502/2-384-3535.

Hospital Universitario Esperanza, 6a Av 7-49, Zona 10, ☎ 502/2-362-8626.

Hospital Herrera Llerandi, 6a Av 8-71, Zona 10, ☎ 502/2-384-5959, emergency, ☎ 502/2-334-5955.

Cedros de Libano, 8a Av 2-48, Zona 1, ☎ 502/2-230-6274/6/8.

Centro Medico, 6a Av 3-47, Zona 10, ☎ 502/2-332-3555.

PUBLIC

Hospital General San Juan de Dios, 1a Av 10-50, Zona 1, ☎ 502/2-253-0443/47. This is the main public hospital.

IGGS, Instituto Guatemalteco de Seguridad Social, 9a Calle 7-55, Zona 9, ☎ 502/2-332-1009, 2-332-4031, 2-332-1278, 2-332-3252.

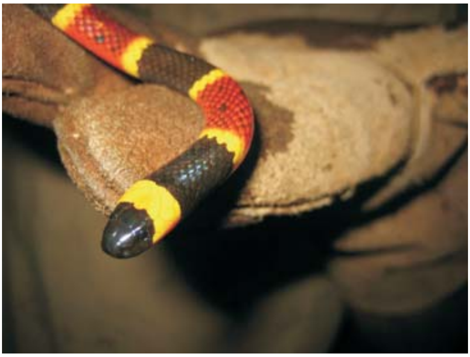
Nuestra Señora del Pilar, 3a Calle 10-71, Zona 15, Colonia Tecún Umán, ☎ 502/2-420-0000.

Roosevelt Hospital, Calzada Roosevelt, Zona 11, ☎ 502/2-471-1441, 2-472-1442, 2-471-2389, 2-472-1381. Affiliated with University San Carlos School of Medicine.

Hospital General de Accidentes, 13 Av 1-51 Col. Monte Real, Zona 4, Mixco, ☎ 502/2-437-9625-29.

SERIOUS AILMENTS

INSECT & SNAKE BITES



Coral snake

Most snakes in Guatemala are nocturnal and very timid, so the chances of a snake bite are slim. However, if you are traveling deep into the jungle make sure that one of your guides is carrying an anti-venom kit for snake bites. Wear long pants and hiking boots and stay on the trails. You will notice that most of the locals favor rubber boots that come up to their knees for walking in the jungle and they don't veer from the path. The two snakes to watch for are the **coral snake**, easily identified by its red, orange and black stripes and the yellow "**barba amarilla**" (yellow beard or fer-de-lance). This snake is known for attacking without provocation and should definitely be avoided.

Avoiding snakes is one of the primary reasons for hiring a guide.

There are only three types of spider bites that will need medical attention: **tarantula**, **black widow** (*latrodectus*) and **brown recluse** (*loxosceles*). The tarantula is known locally as the "araña de caballo" (horse spider) because they like to bite the hooves of horses and cows. They are sometimes found in banana trees as well. The bite resembles a bee sting, and if you are allergic to bees then you should seek medical attention.

The black widow spider likes to hide in dark places and its bite causes considerable pain and tissue damage. Although it is not life-threatening, you should have a doctor look at the area. Keep it clean and dry. The most serious bite is from the *Loxoceles reclusa*, the brown recluse spider or violin spider. In humans, their venom kills tissue surrounding the bite and then leaves a deep open sore that spreads. If you are bitten by a recluse spider, seek medical attention immediately and obtain medication to stop the tissue damage. Treatment includes cutting out the area that was bitten to prevent the spread of poison. These spiders are easily spotted by their light brown appearance with the dark shape of a violin on their head. Both the black widow and brown recluse like to nest in outhouses and latrines (the buttocks is the most common place for a bite). So check your outhouse with a flashlight before using it at night.

Fortunately, bites from the **scorpions** living in Guatemala are not fatal, but they can cause dizziness and numbness, especially in the mouth.

Treatment involves rest and taking an antihistamine. Some people are more sensitive than others. Again, if you are allergic to bee stings you should seek medical attention immediately if bitten. The best treatment is prevention. Scorpions are shy creatures who like dark and damp places. To avoid getting bitten, don't walk outside in bare feet and check bags, shoes and backpacks before using them. Don't store any such items on the floor.

Watch out for the vicious **red ants** that will crawl up your pant legs and then bite all at once. The venom from their stings bubbles up into a small blister that itches for days. If bitten, ask for a cream for "hormigua roja" (red ant) at the local pharmacy. They will know what to give you.

DEHYDRATION/ALTITUDE SICKNESS

Be sure to drink plenty of water to avoid dehydration in the tropical parts of Guatemala. The first symptom of dehydration is extreme fatigue and irritation. In the highlands, you may experience altitude sickness, which also will leave you feeling weak and tired. The only cure for this is to rest and get use to the climate. Drinking plenty of water will help as well.

DENGUE FEVER

This viral infection has been steadily increasing in Guatemala since 2006. It's usually found in the lowlands or in large urban areas where there are plenty of mosquitoes. Also known as break-bone fever because it sometimes causes severe joint and muscle pain, dengue fever usually starts suddenly with a high fever, rash, severe headache, pain behind the eyes, and muscle and joint pain. The illness can last up to 10 days, but complete recovery can take as long as a month. There is no specific treatment except for plenty of rest and fluids.

HEPATITIS A

Hepatitis A is not really a worry unless you are staying in filthy hotels and eating in dirty restaurants. Most moderately priced hotels and family run restaurants are clean. While it's not dangerous or life-threatening, Hepatitis A does make you sick for several weeks. Consider getting a vaccination.

HEPATITIS B

If you plan to have romantic trysts with locals you should consider getting a Hepatitis B vaccine. You can get this disease through sexual contact or a blood transfusion. It's not that prevalent in Guatemala.

LEISHMANIASIS BRAZILIENSIS

This infection is transmitted by sand flies found on beaches. While it's rare, there have been several cases reported in Guatemala. Symptoms include a fever with a general feeling of malaise. Typically, the bite turns into an ulcer with a raised border. The disease should be treated immediately since it can attack other parts of the body, making it way into the bones. Prevention is best, so avoid outdoor activities on the beach from dusk to dawn when sand flies are more active. Use a good repellent with at least 30% concentration of DEET. If you are not sleeping in an area that is well screened or air-conditioned, use a mosquito net with at least 18 holes to the inch and tuck it under your mattress. If possible, use a bed net that has been soaked in or sprayed with permethrin.

MALARIA

The World Health Organization (WHO) has issued warnings for *plasmodium vivax* malaria in the Petén, Alta Verapaz, Baja Verapaz and San Marcos. There are moderate warnings for Escuintla, Huehuetenango, Izabal, Quiche, Retalhuleu, Suchitepequez and Zacapa. There is no risk in the highlands, Guatemala City, Antigua or Lake Atitlán, since all these places are above 4,921 feet (1,500 m). The good news is that *plasmodium vivax* malaria rarely has complications and almost all cases of respond to chloroquine.

Preventive treatment for malaria consists of a taking 500 mg of **chloroquine** once per week for one to two weeks before arrival and for four weeks after departure. Many people find the side effects worse than the disease. Chloroquine may cause stomach upset, diarrhea, headache, dizziness, blurred vision, and itching. An alternative is **malarone**, a prescription drug that you take one a day. Side effects for this drug include abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting, headaches, dizziness, and loss of muscle strength.

To protect yourself, use bug spray, wear long sleeves and pants to go into the jungle and invest in a mosquito net. Go indoors at dusk and make sure your hotel has got good screens.

RABIES

It's best to avoid contact with stray dogs since rabies is a major concern. If you get bitten, clean out the wound with hot water and soap and then contact the local health authorities. Dogs are rarely vaccinated against rabies, so you will have to be closely monitored. If you're at all worried about rabies, consider getting a vaccine.

TYPHOID FEVER

There is a risk of typhoid fever is the more rural parts of Guatemala so talk with your doctor about vaccination. There is now medication that consists of three pills taken every two days, or a shot. Side effects include a very high fever, abdominal discomfort, headache, nausea, rash or hives of rose-colored spots. The vaccination is good for three years. If you're in an area where water is scarce and sanitation questionable, then it's best to avoid raw fruits and vegetables that can't be peeled, ice, lettuce and locally made popsicles or flavored ice.

TOURISTA

Tourista, or travelers' diarrhea, is the most common ailment. The usual culprit is the water. Always peel your fruits or vegetables before eating or disinfect them using an iodine solution sold at the local grocery store. A pinch of chlorine in the water will do the trick as well. Locals tend to avoid the tap water too, so most places use purified water. If you are eating at an establishment that doesn't have electricity or running water, avoid anything with meat and stick to things that have been boiled like vegetable soup.

If you do get *tourista*, eat lightly, avoiding dairy products, beans and meat. Rice, bananas and toast are good food. Drink plenty of fluids, including chamomile tea, known locally as manzana tea. Avoid taking Imodium as this medicine will bind you up and it's best to let the bug run through your system. If you are still sick after three days, have bloody diarrhea, fever, shaking chills or marked abdominal pain, get yourself to a doctor. The doctors in Guatemala are experts at dealing with this kind of thing and after ruling our any of the more serious diseases, will likely prescribe something that gets you better immediately. Should you have any stomach or bowl problems after you return home, tell your doctor you have been down south.

MEDICAL TRAVEL INSURANCE

No one plans to get sick or have an accident while on vacation but things don't also go according to plan. Check with your own medical insurance company to see if they cover you at all while out of the country. There are a number of companies offering travel insurance. Check the fine print and make sure you are fully covered including airlift costs before signing on the dotted line.

International SOS Assistance, Inc., 3600 Horizon Boulevard, Suite 300, Trevose, PA 19053, ☎ 215/942-8000, www.internationalsos.com.

International Medical Groups, Inc., 2960 Meridian Street, Indianapolis, IN 46208-4715, ☎ 800/628-4664 or 317/655-4500, www.imglobal.com.

Travel Insurance Services, 2950 Camino Diablo, Suite 300, Walnut Creek, CA 94597-3991, ☎ toll-free US 800/937-1387, 925/932-1387, www.travelinsure.com.

Insurance to Go, Worldwide Insurance Agency, 500 Professional Center Drive, Suite 515, Novato, CA 94947, ☎ toll-free 877/598-8646, 415/898-0584, fax 415/898-0877, www.insurancetogo.com.

InsureMyTrip, 100 Commerce Drive, Warwick, RI, 02886, ☎ 800/487-4722, 401/773-9300, www.insuremytrip.com.

Canadian citizens may want to check out www.snowbirds.org to see how much of their medical expenses while traveling are covered by the health care system in each province. The official site for medical insurance is www.hc-sc.gc.ca.

MOTHERLY TIPS ON STAYING HEALTHY

- Bring prescribed medication in its original packaging. Know the generic name (rather than the brand name) so a substitute can be found if needed.
- If you need syringes for medications, get a signed letter from your doctor stating they are a medical necessity. You may want to get the letter translated into Spanish.
- Bring an extra pair of glasses or contact lenses.
- Wear a medical alert bracelet if you have any allergies.
- Get adequate medical insurance, particularly if you are an adventure traveler. Make sure your insurance covers all your medical expenses abroad and will pay upfront for emergency evacuations.
- Avoid contact with stray dogs. Rabies are a major concern in Guatemala. If you get bitten, clean the wound thoroughly with hot water and soap. Contact the local health authorities immediately at the Centro de Salud or the local hospital. The police can also help. Very few dogs are vaccinated against rabies, so you will have to be closely monitored.
- Wear sun block, even in the highlands, where the sun is just as strong as on the beach.
- Always use a condom. Guatemala has AIDS as well.
- Leave motorcycles and scooters to the locals who are used to riding on cobblestone streets.
- Buy only bottled water and make sure the seal isn't broken.
- While on the road, avoid foods that you can't boil or peel.
- Get a good bug spray with 10% DEET.
- To avoid ticks, wear long sleeves, long pants, hats and shoes for tromping through the jungle.
- Be careful swimming off the Pacific coast, where riptides are dangerous.

Top 20 Attractions

© Clive Lewis

Our Lady of Mercy Church, Antigua

POPUL VUH & IXCHEL MUSEUMS, Guatemala City (pages 82-83)

NUESTRA SENORA DE LA MERCED (Our Lady of Mercy Church), Antigua (page 113)

PACAYA VOLCANO, Escuintla (page 121)

SANTA MARIA VOLCANO/SANTIAGUITO, Quetzaltenango (page 195)

TODOS SANTOS CUCHUMATAN, Huehuetenango (page 221)

MONTERRICO NATURAL RESERVE/ HAWAII NATIONAL PARK, Santa Rosa (page 448)

CHICHICASTENANGO MARKET, Quiché (page 233).

HIKING THE IXIL TRIANGLE, Quiché (page 247)

SEMUC CHAMPEY, Alta Verapaz (page 269)

LAKE ATITLAN & ITS VILLAGES (Sololá), (pages 145-178)

© Emilio Piovesan

Looking out over Lake Atitlán from the Tzam Poc Hotel

CANDELERIA CAVES, Alta Verapaz (page 282)

MARIO DARY RIVERA BIOTOPO DEL QUETZAL, Baja Verapaz (page 258)

Home in the Río Dulce Canyon

BOCAS DE POLOCHIC, Izabal (page 399)

RÍO DULCE CANYON, Izabal (page 381)

RUINS OF QUIRIGUA, Izabal (page 360)

SIERRA DE LAS MINAS BIOSPHERE, El Progresso (page 413)

BASILICIA & BLACK CHRIST OF ESQUIPULAS, Chiquimula (page 433)

TIKAL, El Petén (page 317)

SCARLET MACAW TRAIL, El Petén (page 335)

LAKE PETEXBATÚN, El Petén (page 343)

Guatemala City

Guatemala's capital is the largest city in Central America. It has also been voted as one of the ugliest in the world, with good reason. The cityscape is eclipsed by a hideous mess of poorly constructed shantytowns piled on top of one another. Add the traffic problems, pollution, grinding poverty and growing crime rate and you have a city with plenty of problems.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- History 66
- Transportation 69
- Adventures on Foot/Sights 72
- Where to Stay 84
- Where to Eat 91
- Nightlife 94
- Day-trips from the City 95
- Shopping 96

Plenty of visitors skip the city altogether, which can be difficult to do since all transportation routes lead to "Guate," as Guatemalans call it. The main immigration offices, banks, hospitals and airport are also here. At one point or another you are going to find yourself in the capital, so you might as well make the best of it.

If you can get past the bad first impression, there are some wonderful things to enjoy. Guate has an active cultural life with incredible museums and excellent restaurants. The best way to handle the city is to take it in small doses. Pick a couple of sights close to one another and go from there. Guatemala City is divided into zones and some are better than others. Most of the tourist sites are in Zona 1, Zona 4, Zona 10 and Zona 13. In the past, the historical center of Zona 1 was quite dangerous, but the new POLITUR (Policia de Turismo, ☎ 502/2-361-6052) have started cleaning up the area. The Comite de Seguridad y Turismo del Centro Historico (Security and Tourism Committee of the Historical Center) now employs 420 National Civil Police agents to patrol the central area and market. Some are on horses. Crime in that area has decreased significantly.

NOTE: Many travelers are choosing to stay in Zona 13, close to the airport and most of the museums worth seeing.

WARNING: The one area that should be avoided altogether is **Zone 12**, in the city's south, where the notorious El Mezquital is located. More than 120,000 people are thought to live in area that spans over six districts. Because it is considered an illegal settlement, there are few services. With no police force, the area is now under control of drug lords and gangs.

Unlike other parts of Guatemala, budget travel is not really sensible in Guate. Plan on spending a bit more on transportation and accommodation in order to be safe.

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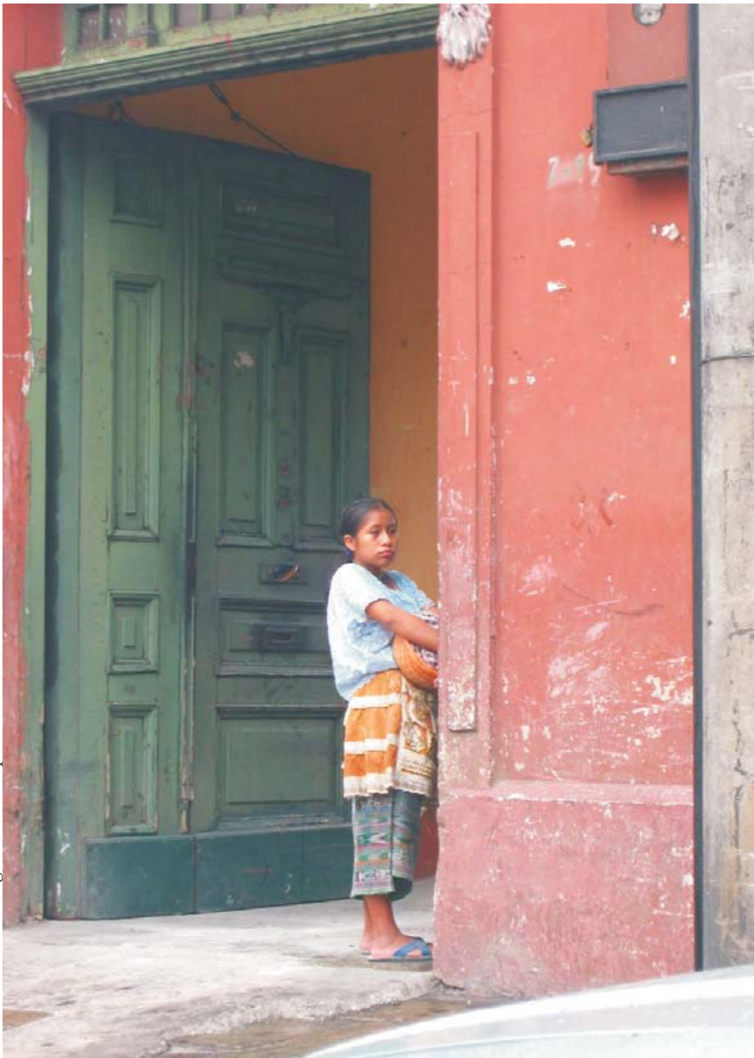
Hanging out

HISTORY

Guatemala City was first a Maya city known as **Kaminal Juyú** that was settled in the Middle Preclassic period (1000-500 BC). Between AD 200 and 230, Kaminal Juyú became an ally of the powerful northern city El Mirador. Because of this partnership, it was able to control all trade routes and became a prosperous and powerful city-state. Later, during the Early Classic period (AD 200-500), it also developed ties with the invading Teotihuacán of Mexico. By AD 900, the city was deserted. Its buildings became hidden in the jungle, overlooked by all.

In 1620, the **Spanish** came into the area to build **La Ermita**, a small outpost designed to keep trade routes open. It remained a backwater for another 162 years before being chosen as the new capital. Actually, Guatemala City was not the first choice. The first capital was founded in 1520 near the Cakchiquel capital of Iximché. But the Spanish lieutenant in charge, Alvarado, was eventually driven out of the area – he fled to the Almononga Valley to build his second capital at the foot of the Agua Volcano. This was a bad choice. In 1531 the town was buried in a mudslide during a volcanic eruption. The capital was moved farther east into the Panchoy Valley, between the three volcanoes – Agua, Fuego and de Acatenango. It became the city of Antigua. This third site was not a wise choice either. Antigua was continually being hit with earthquakes. The worst one, in 1773, left Antigua completely destroyed. The Governor had had enough and petitioned the King of Spain to move the capital. After some initial research, he settled on La Ermita. Permission was granted and on Jan-uary 1, 1776, La Nueva Guatemala de la Asuncion became the new capital. There were high hopes for the new capital designed to resemble a Spanish colonial city. There was a majestic Plaza Mayor (Great Plaza), wide streets and Neoclassic architecture. Estates close by the center were given to wealthy citizens to replace the properties left behind in Antigua. Sadly, money ran out and many of the grand buildings were never completed.



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To this day, Guatemala City is not as elegant as Antigua. By 1800 the city's population was up to 26,000 residents but little work was done until the Conservative Government of 1855 began completing buildings and naming streets. The University of San Carlos de Guatemala, started in 1786, was finally finished between 1849 and 1855. Several churches were also erected.

The Liberal government of 1873 opened the city and country to Europeans, who arrived in the city and began opening businesses. In order to develop properties for them, President Justo Rufino Barrios seized land from the church which, at that time, still owned 60% of the land. To organize the city he adopted the Byzantine street numbering system that's still in use today (see below, under *Adventures on Foot*). In 1890, the suburb of Exposicion was built in honor of the World Exhibition. The area became Zona 4.

The new liberal president **José María Reyna Barrios**, elected in 1892, decided to give the city a facelift. Using Paris as his role model, he ordered the creation of the wide Boulevard 30 de Junio, known today as Av la Reforma. A replica of the Eiffel Tower, botanical gardens and a temple to Minerva were also built at this time. Avenida 6 became Avenida Minerva and wealthy families fleeing Cobán after a 1902 earthquake settled into this area, known today as Zonas 9 and 10.

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Avenida 6 is the city's main drag

With a beautiful new look and established culture, Guatemala was set for a bright future. Then, in late 1917 a series of earthquakes hit the city. The tremors continued until early 1918 and, when the dust settled, the city was in ruins. President Ubico immediately started a reconstruction campaign. During this time the post office, the National Police Building, and the National Palace were built. But once again money ran out and when rural Guatemalans from all over the country began coming to the city looking for work, there was no place for them to live. They began building shanty towns in the nearby hills. The flow of people to the city increased during the turbulent years of 1954 to 1998, when the civil war displaced thousands of civilians. Again they landed in the surrounding hills. The problems were compounded by the 1976 earthquake, which reduced the city to rubble, killed 23,000 and injured another 75,000. Over one million were left homeless and rebuilt their house with any material available.

Guatemala City remains the political, commercial and administrative center of the country. Pollution, overcrowding and garbage continue to be its biggest environmental concerns. The more pressing issue, though, is poverty. There are over two million residents living in desperate poverty alongside the two percent who are wealthy. Ex-president Álvaro Arzú, now the major of Guatemala City, has unveiled "The City for Living In" plan that will make the city more livable city. One of the latest innovations offered was a new project called Transmetro, consisting of special-purpose lanes for high-capacity buses. The city is continuing to work on the plan to improve the living conditions. The 21st century is going to be challenging.

GETTING HERE & GETTING AROUND

Arriving and departing Guatemala City will probably be the simplest part of your trip. It's everything in between that is complicated.

FRAIJANES
SONRISA
WALTER
PIONEER
The Art of Entertainment
GOODYEAR
JESUS
BOSS

© Miguel Cruz/http://travel.u.nu

A typically colorful bus sits in the shade awaiting passengers

BY AIR

All international flights land at **La Aurora International Airport** in Zona 13, in the southeastern part of the city. Taxis wait outside the terminal on the Arrivals level. Catch a cab into town; the set prices are reasonable, running US $7 to Zona 9 or 10, US $10 for Zona 1. You can try negotiating, but be sure to settle on the price before getting into the cab. It takes about 10 minutes to reach the city.

Public buses offer service from the airport into the city. Tickets are Q15 (about $2) and it takes 45 minutes to reach the downtown core.

BY BUS

All the bus lines from around the country go directly to the capital – look for buses labeled GUATE. Bus terminals are located in Zona 4. This area is not the safest at night. If your bus arrives late, make sure you have hotel reservations already lined up. As soon are you are off the bus, call your hotel and ask them to send a cab for you.

Another safe alternative is to use **tourist shuttles**, which pick you up or drop you off at your hotel. There are plenty of companies operating between the tourist centers like Antigua, Panajachel, Rio Dulce and Guatemala City. If you are coming from the east or north, your service will be direct. If you are coming from the west then you will probably stop over in Antigua first or may have to switch shuttles there. Rates start at US $7 per person.

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Traffic on Calzado Roosevelt

If there are no shuttle services then travel by **first-class bus** into the city. You will be an easy target for thieves on the chicken buses. A first-class bus will get you into the city at a decent hour.

Local bus service is a nightmare. Although frequent and cheap, the routes change on a daily basis in order to avoid traffic so even locals don't know where the buses are going. However, two main routes are pretty reliable: buses from Zone 1 to Zone 10 head down 10a Avenida and buses from Zone 10 to Zone 1 go down either 6a Avenida or 7a Avenida, depending on the direction you are traveling. All public buses stop running at 9 pm, after which time you will be forced to rely on private jitneys called ***ruteleros***. Avoid these if possible, but if you do need to use one, they can be flagged down on the main streets. The fare is just under US $1. It's probably safer to call a taxi.

BY TAXI

Taxis are plentiful and the rates are reasonable. Don't hail taxis off the street (many of them make a practice of robbing tourists). Instead, call for one. Most taxis are metered, but if yours isn't be sure to agree upon a fair price with the driver before jumping in. Tips should be five-10% of the fare.

TAXI SERVICES	
Amarillo Express	☎ 502/2-332-1515
Taxis Blanco y Azul	☎ 502/2-360-0903
Amigo Taxis	☎ 502/5-914-8663
Asociacion de taxis las Americas	☎ 02/ 2-362-0583
Elegance Cab's	☎ 502/2-437-8076
Taxis 2000	☎ 502/2-433-9984
Taxis Camino Real	☎ 502/2-337-4019
Taxis Eurocab	☎ 502/2-289-5215
Taxis Universal	☎ 502/5-700-0092

SHUTTLE SERVICES	
Adrelina Tours	☎ 502/7-832-1108
Gran Jaguar	☎ 502/7-832-3107
Monarca Travel	☎ 502/7-832-1939
Mundo Maya	☎ 502/7-832-9988
Servicios Turisticos Atitlan	☎ 502/7-832-3371
Sin Fronteras	☎ 502/7-832-1017
Turansa	☎ 502/7-832-2928
Vision Travel	☎ 502/5-795-2345
Voyageur Tours	☎ 502/7-832-4237

NOTE: Rush hour is brutal. Streets are jammed between 6 am and 10 am and from 4 pm until 8 pm.

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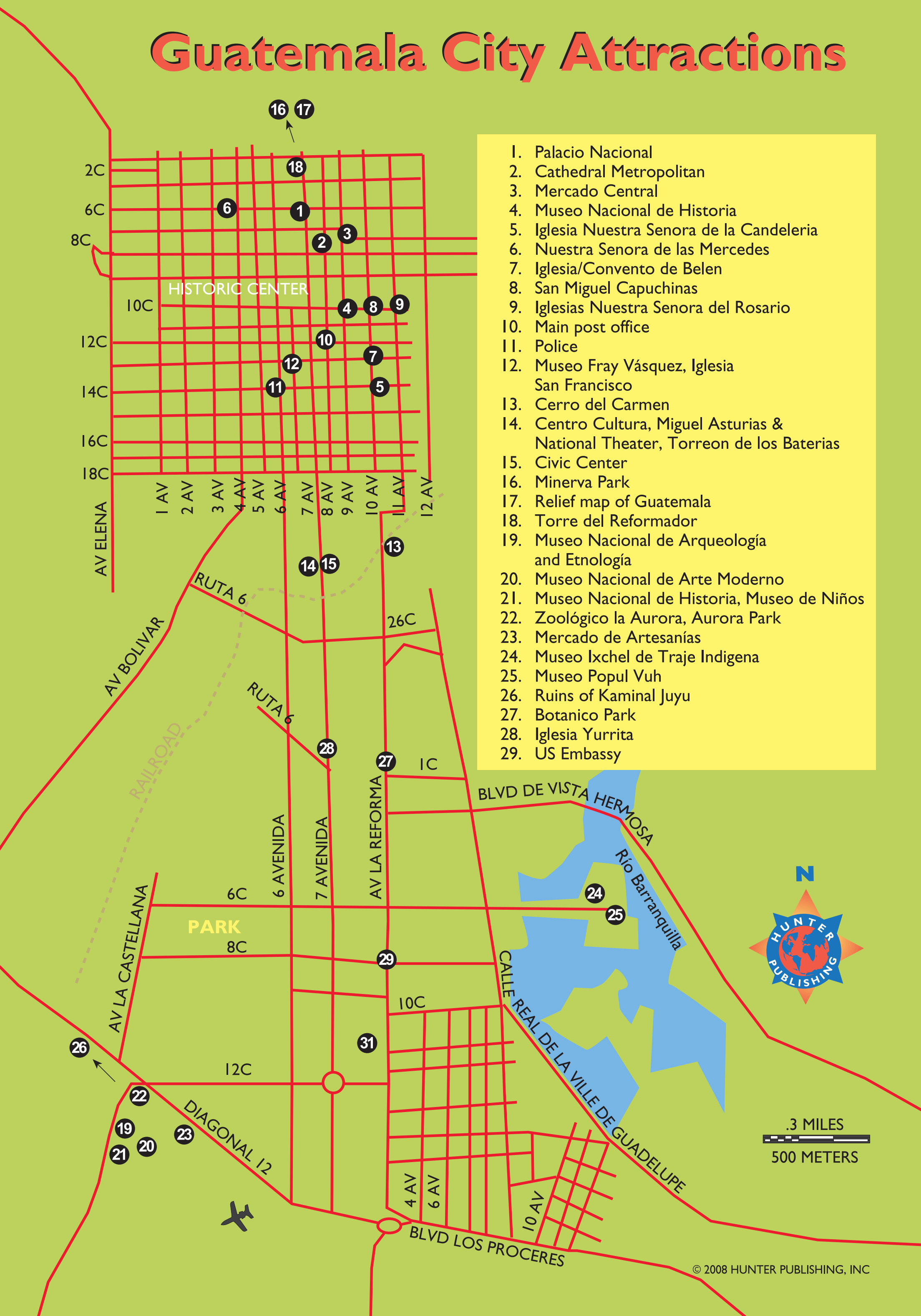
Developed ravine, Guatemala City

ADVENTURES ON FOOT/SIGHTSEEING

Finding an **address** can be a challenge. The antiquated numbering system was implemented by an engineer in 1877. It was complicated back then and hasn't improved since. Streets are designed on the classic Spanish grid system. **Avenidas** (avenues) always run north to south. **Calles** (streets) always run east to west. The city is also divided into **zones**, some centered around Zone 1, the historical district. Zone 2 through Zone 6 run counter-clockwise around Zone 1. A second circle places Zone 7 behind Zone 3, and Zones 8 through 10 sit behind Zone 4. A third circle places Zones 11 through 15 behind Zones 8 through 10. There are no markers announcing you have moved into a new zone. The main thoroughfares such, as 6a Avenida, 7a Avenida and Avenida La Reforma, are used as the boundaries since they keep the same names while crossing several zones. Each of the zones has its own grid system, making it even more confusing. Never assume that 12th Avenue in Zone 10 is the same street as 12th Avenue in another zone. Knowing the zone is crucial to finding your location.

Each municipal address has three numbers followed by its zone number. The first part of the address is the actual avenue or street, the second number is the cross street, and the third number is the actual municipal address of the building followed by the zone. For example, 3

Guatemala City Attractions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18
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2
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6
HISTORIC CENTER
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9
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16C
18C
1 AV
2 AV
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RUTA 6
26C
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BLVD DE VISTA HERMOSA
Río Barranquilla
N
HUNTER PUBLISHING
6 AVENIDA
7 AVENIDA
AV LA REFORMA
24
25
6C
PARK
8C
29
CALLE REAL DE LA VILLE DE GUADELUPE
10C
31
AV LA CASTELLANA
26
12C
22
19
20
21
23
DIAGONAL 12
4 AV
6 AV
10 AV
BLVD LOS PROCERES
.3 MILES
500 METERS

1. Palacio Nacional
2. Cathedral Metropolitan
3. Mercado Central
4. Museo Nacional de Historia
5. Iglesia Nuestra Senora de la Candeleria
6. Nuestra Senora de las Mercedes
7. Iglesia/Convento de Belen
8. San Miguel Capuchinas
9. Iglesias Nuestra Senora del Rosario
10. Main post office
11. Police
12. Museo Fray Vásquez, Iglesia San Francisco
13. Cerro del Carmen
14. Centro Cultura, Miguel Asturias & National Theater, Torreon de los Baterias
15. Civic Center
16. Minerva Park
17. Relief map of Guatemala
18. Torre del Reformador
19. Museo Nacional de Arqueología and Etnología
20. Museo Nacional de Arte Moderno
21. Museo Nacional de Historia, Museo de Niños
22. Zoológico la Aurora, Aurora Park
23. Mercado de Artesanías
24. Museo Ixchel de Traje Indigena
25. Museo Popul Vuh
26. Ruins of Kaminal Juyu
27. Botanico Park
28. Iglesia Yurrita
29. US Embassy

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Avenida 17-05, Zona 14 would be read as Third Avenue, between 17 and 18 street, House No 5, Zone 14. Of course, there are anomalies, like diagonal streets called *rutas* and *vías* and winding boulevards called *diagonales*. Sometimes additional information is added such as the name of the building. The system takes some getting used to and many locals rely on landmarks for actual directions.

As a tourist, you will only need to concern yourself with Zones 1, 4, 10 and 13. Aside from Zone 13, the others are in the city center and are easily found. INGUAT has some good maps for tourists called *Mapa Vial Turístico.*

WARNING: Walking around in Zona 10 is safe. However, be careful in Zona 1, as it can lead to some of the poorer neighborhoods where robberies are more likely to take place.

WALKING TOUR

ZONA 1

Zona 1 is the city's historical section and it has the most attractions. It also has a red-light district right beside the attractions and this area should be avoided, especially after dark. Most of the city's cheap and mid-range hotels are in Zona 1. The best day to visit is Sunday, when the central plaza is full of families who come to enjoy all the action.

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Tamales being sold on the square

Plaza Mayor de la Constitución, 5a and 7a Av between 6a and 8a Calle. This plaza is the heart of the city and was one of the first places built in 1776. A large fountain stands in the middle of the plaza. Surrounding the park are other important historical monuments, such as the National Library (*Biblioteca Nacional*) and the Metropolitan Cathedral (*Catedral Metropolitana*). Plaza Mayor is also known as Plaza of the Arms (*Plaza de Armas*), one of its original names. On Sunday the plaza is filled with musicians, stalls selling crafts and small *comedores* (eateries).

© Robert Lerich/iStockphoto

National Palace, Plaza Mayor

Palacio Nacional, north side of Plaza Mayor, 6 Calle between Avs 6 & 7, ☎/ fax 502/2-253-0748. This is the former residence of General Jorge Ubico. It was built while he was in office between 1936 and 1943 and now houses the executive branch of the government. It is a rather eclectic blend of Renaissance, neoclassical and baroque styles using concrete, brick and granite. Many of Guatemala's foremost artists decorated the building and it is considered a museum because of their contribution. The 4,400-lb (2,000-kg) Bohemian-crystal chandelier should not be missed. On the second floor the reception room (*Salas de Recepion*) has a beautiful stained-glass window telling the story of Guatemala. Also look for **Kilometer Zero** (*kilometro cero*), the exact center of the country. Admission is free. Open 9 am to 5:30 pm, Monday to Friday, 8 am to 3 pm on weekends.

Catedral Metropolitana, west of Plaza Major, Av 7, 6 & 8 Calle, ☎ 502/2-232-7621. Also know as El Sagrario (The Most Sacred), this church is one of the few remaining 16th-century buildings in Guatemala City. There isn't much to see in this short, squat structure. Construction on the building was started in 1776 and finished in 1868. During the 1917 earthquake

Catedral Metropolitana

the baroque façade came crashing down and the cracked bell tower fell onto the altar below. The bell has been removed, but little else has been restored. Inside is the **Virgin of Perpetual Help** *(Virgén del Perpetuo Socorro)*, Guatemala's oldest Christian image, which was brought over in 1522 by Hernan Cortes. Carved on the columns outside are the names of those killed during the civil war – a poignant reminder of the lives lost. The church is open daily. No admission fee.

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Mercado Central, located behind Palacio Nacional, Av 8, ☎ 502/5-462-0208. The central market is one big hunk of concrete designed in reaction to the 1976 earthquake. It's the place to shop for handicrafts and you'll find goods from every region in the country. Hundreds of tiny booths sell everything from ceramics, sculptures and wooden masks to statues and leather goods – all at very low prices. If you can stand the crush of people, you can find some real bargains here. Beware of pickpockets in this market! Open 7 am to 6 pm, Monday to Saturday.

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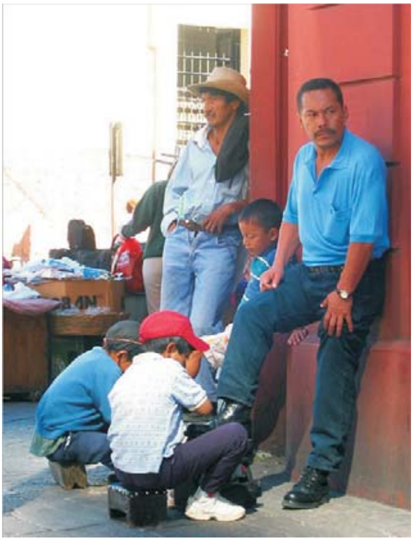
Restored post office

Pasaje Aycinena, 9 and 10 Calle between Avs 6 and 7. This cobblestone passageway used to link the houses on both sides of the street. All that is left is an arch with the name carved into the stone. The ground floors have been converted into shops and boutiques.

Palacio de Correos, Av 7 and 12 Calle, ☎ 502/2-332-6101. This is a good example of the nationalistic colonial style created in Guatemala during the late 1930s. Started in 1937 and completed in 1940, the palace has two main buildings connected by an arched pedestrian walkway. The exterior walls are covered with national symbols in murals created by local artists. In 1981, the palace was declared a national monument and it now serves as home to the National Department of Postal Services (*Dirección General de Correos y Telégrafos de Guatemala*). Open 8:30am-5:30pm, Monday-Friday; 9 am-1 pm, Saturday. No admission.

Palacio de la Policía Nacional (Palace of the National Police), 6 Av 13-71, ☎ 502/2-232-0221. During the 1930s, Guatemala endured General Ubico, a dictator who believed he was the reincarnation of Napoleon. We have him to thank for this outlandish building that resembles a medieval castle complete with battlements. It's too hideous to be missed and makes a perfect headquarters for the Guatemalan police. Open daily.


© Miguel Cruz/http://travel.u.nu

Shoeshine boys are all over the city

Nuestra Señora de las Mercedes (Our Lady of Mercy), 5 Calle 11-67, ☎ 502/2-232-0631. Many of the images in this church were transported from Antigua when the capital was moved, and the building itself has survived numerous earthquakes. It features an extensive collection of baroque-style altarpieces, a large collection of colonial-era art and the second-largest organ in the country. The church was originally built by the Merced Order, but was taken over by the Jesuits in 1829. Outside, a stone façade is adorned with Greek columns and decorative scrolls. Open daily from 6 am until 6 pm. No admission.

Iglesia y Convento de Belén (Church and Convent of Belén), 10 Av and 13. At one time, this church and convent stretched for many city blocks. Brother Pedro San José de Betancourt of the Bethlehem Order built the baroque church and convent in 1776 and it housed many carved images of the Virgin Mary and Jesus. In 1813, pro-independence meetings were permitted to take place in the church and, as a result, President Barrios closed the convent and church and appropriated the land. All that remains is the small church. Today, the church has reopened and the convent has been converted to a girls' school. Open 6 am to 7 pm. Free admission.

Nuestra Señora de Candelaria (Our Lady of Candelaria), 13 Av 1-12, ☎ 502/2-253-6376. This beautiful little church took a long time to complete. Started in 1784 using salvage from a church in Antigua, it wasn't finished until 1867. Inside is the famous image of Jésus Nazareno de la Candelaria, brought from Antigua. In 1976, the church suffered severe earthquake damage and it has recently been restored.

El Carmen, Av 8 and 10 Calle, Zona 1, ☎ 502/2-232-8717, was erected in 1791 by slaves and inaugurated in 1814. Its construction was financed by the Marquis of Aycinena, a wealthy son of the dominant merchant family, who eventually entered the Dominican order.

Iglesia San Francisco, 6 Av and 13 Calle, ☎ 502/2-232-3625. Franciscan architects designed this baroque church in 1800 and completed the building in 1829. It's built in the shape of a crucifix with an altar 288 feet (88 meters) high and 39 feet (12 meters) wide in the center. Behind it are carved wooden statues of Jesus and one of the Immaculate Conception donated by King Carlos V of Spain. Open daily from 7 am until 5 pm.

Iglesia de San Francisco

San Miguel Capuchinas (St. Michael of the Capuchins), 10 Calle and Av10, ☎ 502/2-238-2126. This is one of the oldest surviving churches in the capital, inaugurated on August 7th, 1789. It has survived all the earthquakes fairly intact. It features a Mudejar-style roof, the first architectural style of the city (it was later abandoned for a more European look). Inside are several altarpieces with baroque paintings and carvings. Open 9 am to 10 pm daily, offering mass and confession.

Nuestra Señora del Rosario/Santo Domingo de Guzmán (Our Lady of the Rosary/St. Dominic of Guzmán), 12 Av 10-09, ☎ 502/2-232-4942. This is one of the most famous churches in Guatemala. It was built by the Dominicans in 1778 when they moved their order here from Antigua. The building was completed in 1804 and has many valuable pieces of colonial art. Unfortunately, it was severely damaged in 1917 and has been entirely rebuilt. Today it still contains one of the best collections of Dominican colonial art. Open daily, 6:30 am until 5 pm.

Torreón de las Baterias (Tower of the Battery), 24 Calle 3-81, Interior del Centro Cultural Miguel Angel Asturias, ☎ 502/2-253-5286. These are the remains of the San José fort which started as an artillery unit in 1876. The building was abandoned after the 1917 earthquake, when it was badly damaged. In 1994, during an uprising against the government, the fort was destroyed and all that remains is the main tower. For years, this section was used for various functions, including a circus and boxing ring. It was finally given to the Ministry of Defense, which turned the tower into the **Heraldic and Military Arms Museum of**

Guatemala (*Museo Heraldico y de Armas del Ejército de Guatemala*). The museum has a collection of military objects and exhibits. Open 10 am to 5 pm daily. Admission is Q5 for adults, Q2 for children.

Museo Nacional de Historiá, 9 Calle 9-70, ☎ 502/2-253-6149. This historical library and museum opened in 1974. It has a permanent collection of furniture and official documents that date back to 1821. The museum also offers ongoing cultural displays that change according to the seasons. A reference library is also open to the public. Museum is open 9 am to 5 pm, Monday to Friday. Admission is free.

Cerro del Carmen (Carmen Hill), end of 12 Av At the top of this hill is a hermitage dating from 1620, donated to the city by the barefooted Carmelite congregation. Inside is a silver embossed image of the *Virgén* del Carmen. The view from here is quite lovely and many local families come here to enjoy a picnic. Don't come alone or at night.

ZONA 2

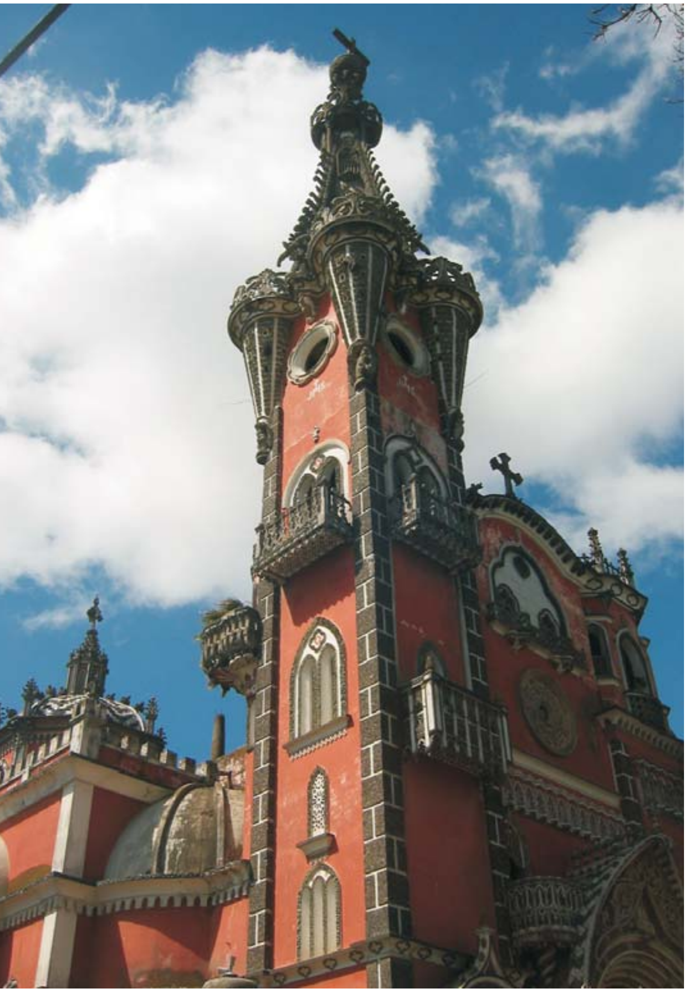
This zone was built for the Maya Indians who left Antigua for the new capital in 1774. The area was gentrified during the 1940s, when the North Hippodrome neighborhood was added and wealthy families started building residences on Av del Hipódromo. It remains a lovely residential area. The park should be avoided after dark.

Parque Minerva – Mapa en Relieve (Minerva Park Relief Map), final de la Av Simeón Cañas, ☎/fax 502/2-254-1114 or 2-289-5800. Minerva Park is not particularly nice but it does have a quirky relief map of Guatemala. Built in 1904, the map shows the geographical features of Guatemala such as mountain ranges, volcanoes, rivers, lakes, ports, roads and various districts and capitals. The whole thing covers 2,152 square yards (1,800 square meters). Its designer, Engineer Francisco Vela, traveled the whole country taking measurements and making calculations so the map would be accurate. You might even get lucky and be there when they turn on the water that makes the rivers flow. There is a small tourist shop nearby selling postcards and books about the map. This attraction is a big hit with kids. Avoid the area after sunset. Open 8 am until 6 pm daily. Admission is Q12.

ZONE 4

This neighborhood was built in 1890 to house a special exhibit in honor of the Paris World Fair. Zona 4 is filled with various government buildings, as well as most bus terminals. Its notable feature is the Civic Center, with its marvelous murals. This is a safe zone, but steer clear of its southern end, as it approaches Zona 3.

Centro Cívico, 7a Av 1-17, Zona 4, ☎ 502/2-285-8000. The Civic Center is made up of a number of important structures built during the 1950s and 1960s, when civic pride was at an all-time high. Among the noteworthy buildings are the Supreme Court (*Corte Suprema de Justicia*), the Social Security Institute (*Instituto Guatemalteco de Seguridad Social*), the Guatemalan Tourist Board (*Instituto Guatemalteco de Turismo, INGUAT*), the Ministry of Finance (*Ministerio de Finanzas Publicas*) and the Bank of Guatemala (*el Banco de Guatemala*). These buildings are covered with incredible mosaics and murals created by Guatemala's foremost artists. The most impressive of these are the mosaic of Carlos Merida on the social security building and the relief murals of Dagoberto Vazquez on the Bank of Guatemala Building.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Iglesia de Yurrita

Iglesia de Yurrita, Ruta 6 8-52 Calle Mariscal Cruz, ☎ 502/312-5143. This little church is one of the most beautiful in the capital. It was named after its designer, Don Felipe de Yurrita, who owned the land from 1928 to 1941. To show his religious devotion, Yurrita built this small chapel dedicated to the Virgin Mary. It reveals an intricate and skillful mixture of Catalan art nouveau, neo-gothic and Mudejar styles. The façade uses cement, stone, tiles and bricks made from plaster, with obsidian, marble and tile accents. Inside are stained-glass windows, a carved marble altar and a painting of the Judgement of Christ in high relief. Open Saturdays from 6 pm until 9 pm and Sundays 8 am until 6 pm.

ZONA 7

Zone 7 is a rather scrappy part of the city that includes a garbage dump, along with the ruins of an ancient Maya city.

Parue Arqueológico Kaminaljuyú, 11a Calle, west of 23a, Zone 7, ☎ 502/2-253-1570. This was once the largest Maya city in the Guatemalan highlands. It was built during the Middle Preclassic period (1000-500 BC) and grew into an important trade center. By AD 100, over 200 hundred pyramids had been constructed in the area, the largest reaching up to 59 feet (18 meters). Through a series of alliances with its powerful northern neighbor, El Mirador, Kaminal Juyú was able to develop into an important commercial center trading in jade and obsidian.

For many years it was thought that the existence of this city was a myth. Archeologists had come across references to it, but they had no physical proof. Its discovery was accidental; in the early 1970s the area was being bulldozed to make room for housing. Underneath were remains of Kaminal Juyú. The city contained some astonishing discoveries, including hieroglyphics that proved the Maya were literate much earlier than previously calculated, before even Tikal or Copán were built. In AD 400, the Teotihuacán from Central Mexico invaded the city and made it their regional capital. They soon controlled the region's jade and obsidian mines and their rulers constructed temples and buildings on top of the old.

Giant head, Kaminaljuyú

Archeologists have now completed over 200 excavations and have found a variety of Maya ceramics, sculpture and architecture. Tombs contained corpses preserved with cinnabar and surrounded by sacred objects such as obsidian knives, stingray spines and quartz crystals. Many of the structures have been left underground in order to preserve them. To visit these ruins you need a special permit from the Anthropological & Historical Institute (*Instituto Guatemalteco de Antropología e Historiá*), IGAEH. You can obtain the permit at their office on 12 Av 11-65, Zone 1. Admission is Q10, which includes your permit

ZONA 9

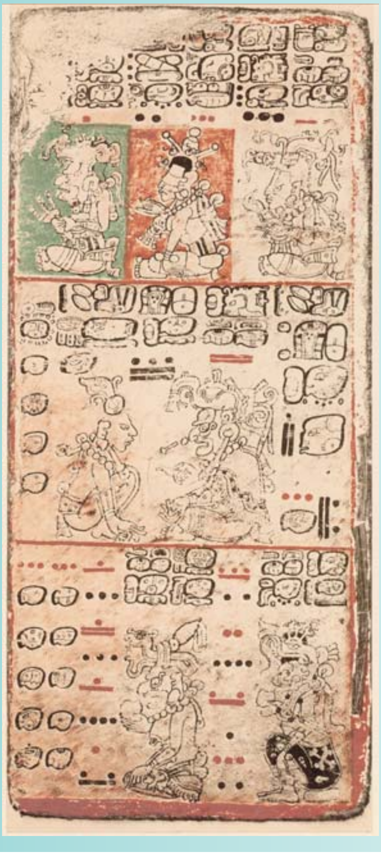
Av la Reforma separates Zone 10 and Zona 9, a wealthy residential area.

Torre del Reformador, 7 Av and 2 Calle. Although only 24 feet (75 meters) tall, this metallic structure is a replica of the Eiffel Tower. It was inaugurated on July 19, 1935 as a memorial to General Justo Rufino Barrios. On top of the tower is a bell donated by Belgium, as well as a beacon donated by American Airlines in 1994 to guide airplanes into Aurora International Airport. It's best seen during the day on foot or at night from a cab.

ZONA 10/ZONA VIVA

Zona 10 is known as Zona Viva because of its nightlife. Many museums, hotels, restaurants and shops are located in this area. It's the safest zone in Guatemala City (and the most expensive) and you can feel secure going out at night here.

Museo Popul Vuh, 6 Calle Final, Universidad Francisco Marroquín, ☎ 502/2-361-2301, fax 502/361-2301. The private Popul Vuh Museum on the Marroquín University campus has an excellent collection of Maya relics, including polychrome incense burners, burial urns, carved wooden masks and traditional textiles of great historical and scientific value. In another room there is a collection of colonial art and silver objects.



Museo Popul Vuh has an accurate copy of the Dresden Codex – one of the few remaining Maya books. This was one of the first Maya manuscripts brought back to Spain by Hernán Cortés in 1519. No one understood the language but the book was still considered a trophy and was given to a member of the Spanish royal family in Dresden. Thus the book became known as the Dresden Codex. It remains one of the few examples of Maya literature. Most Maya manuscripts were burned in 1562 by Fray Diego de Landa at his monastery in Man, Yucatán for being works of the Devil. This vicious destruction of the culture shocked even the Church and as penance Diego de Landa was instructed to write a book about the Maya. *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán* (today entitled *Yucatán Before and After the Conquest,* Dover Press, 1978) was published in 1566 and remains the most significant record we have of Maya beliefs, customs and history.

The museum offers a special tour for children which includes some quick lessons on how to decipher a few hieroglyphics in the Dresden Codex.

An on-site gift shop sells books, magazines, posters, calendars and paintings about the Maya culture. Open 9 am to 5 pm, Monday to Friday, and 9 am to 1 pm on Saturdays. Admission is Q20 for adults, Q6 for children.

Museo Ixchel del Traje Indigena, 6 Calle Final, Campus de la Universidad Francisco Marroquín, ☎/fax 502/2-331-3739. This museum specializes in beautifully curated exhibits of Guatemalan textiles. Its permanent textile collection has samples from over 140 communities spanning several decades. It also runs several research and preservation programs dedicated to indigenous textiles. A permanent watercolor collection by Carmen L. Patterson depicts the various traditional Maya costumes, while paintings by Andres Curruchich document the daily life of the Kaqchiquel Maya.

The **Museum of Children and Young People** (*Museo de la Ninez y de la Juventud*) is part of the Textile Museum and offers children's programs in anything to do with textiles, including painting, embroidering, weaving and using natural inks. There is also a small café, art gallery, bookstore and gift shop. Open 9 am to 5 pm, Monday to Friday, and 9 am to 1 pm on Saturdays. Admission is Q20 for adults, Q6 for children.

Av la Reforma. This avenue runs along the boundary of Zones 9 and 10. Originally built in 1897 by President Barrios, who named it Boulevard 30 de Junio, its design was based on that of the Champs Elysées. The name was changed to Av la Reforma to honor Barrios, who was nicknamed The Reformer because of all the changes he brought to the country. Many historical monuments line this avenue and the whole street has been named a National Heritage Site. The avenue begins at Plaza Obelisco, where the eternal flame of Guatemala burns.

ZONA 13

One of the newer and more modern zones in the city, Zona 13 is known for its beautiful museums and parks. Av de las Americás separates Zona 13 and 14. The International Airport is in Zona 13.

Museo Nacional de Arqueologiá y Etnologia, Finca la Aurora, ☎ 502/5-472-0489. Founded in 1945, the National Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology houses a collection of Maya jade, obsidian and pottery objects found in the royal tombs at Kaminal Juyú, Tikal and other ruins. Also included in the exhibit are stelae and carvings. Open 9 am to 4 pm, Tuesday to Friday, 9 am to noon, and 2 to 4 pm on Saturday. Admission is Q28.

Museo de Arte Moderno, Finca la Aurora, Local 6, ☎/fax 502/5-472-0467. The Museum of Modern Art was originally opened in Zona 1 in 1934; it was moved to its present location in 1968. The museum has a permanent collection of Guatemalan art and sculpture by the country's leading artists. Open 9 am to 4 pm, Tuesday to Friday, 9 am to noon and 2 to 4 pm on Saturday. Admission is Q9.

Museo de Historiá Natural, Finca la Aurora, ☎/fax 502/5-472-0468. The Museum of Natural History opened in 1950 with a small collection of animals that has grown steadily to include a large range of indigenous birds and mammals, as well as mineral and paleontological specimens. It features a butterfly pavilion and ecological library. The grounds include botanical gardens that focus on local and exotic plants, including many endangered species. Open 9 am to 4 pm, Tuesday to Friday, and 9 am to noon and 2 to 4 pm on Saturday. Admission is Q12.

© Shelagh McNally

Yarn for sale at market

Mercado de Artesanías, Finca la Aurora. Located by the museums is the official handicrafts market offering a variety of antiques, textiles, wooden carvings, ceramics and leather goods. Open 8 am to 6 pm, Monday to Saturday.

Zoológico la Aurora, Finca la Aurora, ☎ 502/5-472-0507. This zoo opened in 1925 with a selection of local animals. Since then it has been renovated to include a variety of species from around the world, all displayed in their natural habitat. It's a popular destination with local families, who also come for the interactive children's museum. Open 9 am to 5 pm, Tuesday to Sunday. Admission is Q10 for adults, Q5 for children.

WHERE TO STAY

Guatemala City has a wide range of accommodations. There are plenty of large hotels offering all modern amenities (with prices to match). You can also find nice boutique hotels offering rooms with kitchens at reasonable prices. Most of the grand hotels are found in Zona 9, Zona 10 and Zona 13, while smaller hotels are found in Zona 4. All budget hotels are located in Zona 1. Be careful going the budget route, since many of these hotels are in areas that are not safe at night.

HOTEL PRICE CHART	
Prices are per person	
$	under US $25
$$	US $26-50
$$$	US $51-85
$$$$	US $86-125
$$$$$	over US $125

ZONA I

Posada Belén, *13 Calle A 10-30, Zona 1, ☎ 502/2-253-4530 or 502/2-251-3478, http://posadabelen.com, 9 rooms, $$.* This museum hotel is an absolute oasis and one of the loveliest hotels in the city. Originally a colonial family home built in 1873, it has been operating as a hotel since 1972. It has an incredible garden and over 300 authentic Maya artifacts on display alongside antique handicrafts, furniture and paintings. Rooms are truly homey and welcoming, furnished with antiques and Guatemalan art. The common rooms and dining room are equally comfortable. The amiable Sanchinelli family, which owns and operates the hotel, will go out of their way to make your stay in the city safe and comfortable. It's small wonder that this is an extremely popular hotel.

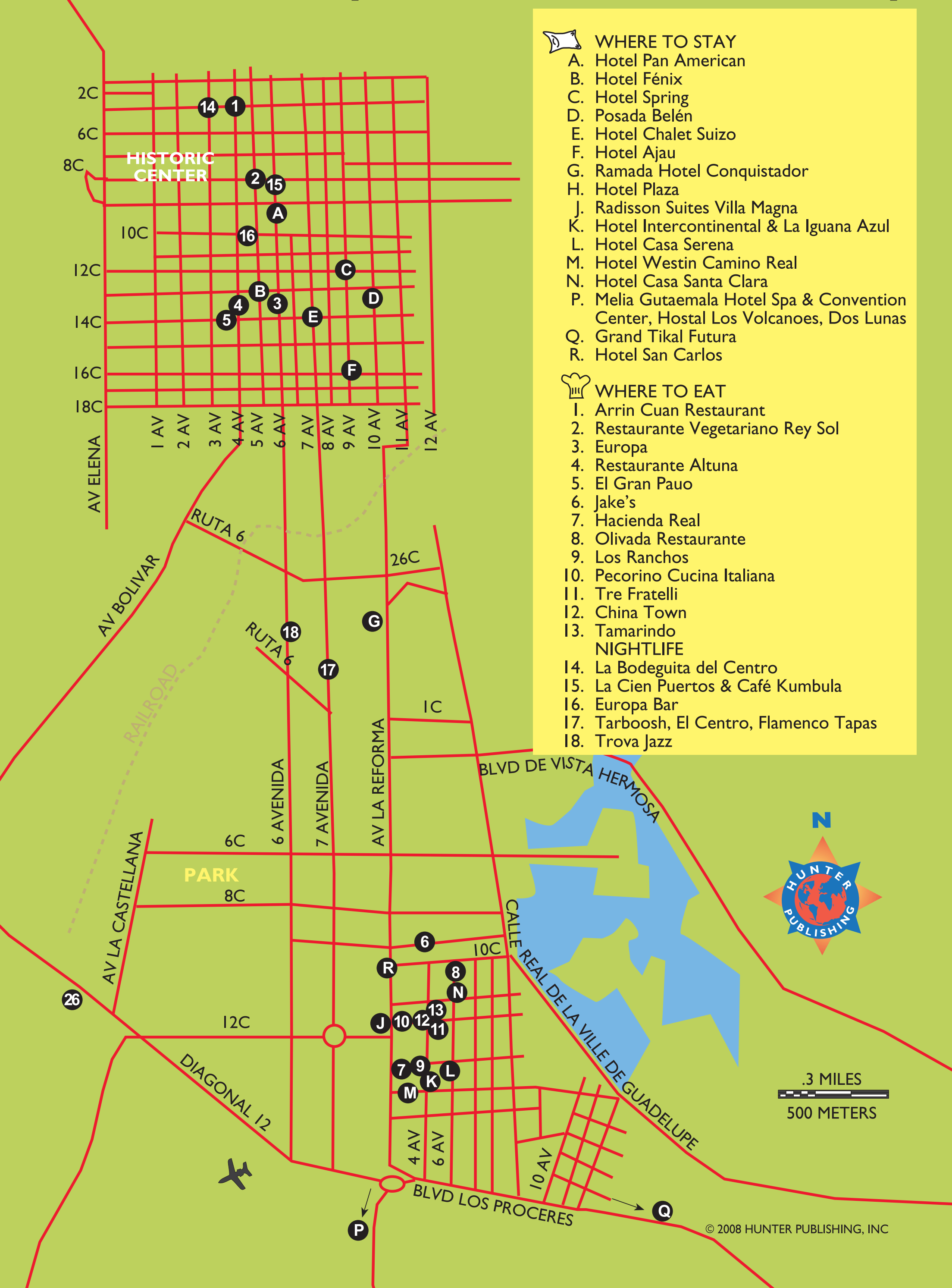
© Posada Belen

Hotel Pan American, *9a Calle 5-63, Zona 1, ☎ 502/2-232-6807, fax 502/2-232-6807, www.hotelpanamerican.com, 52 rooms, $$.* The Pan American was built in 1942 and for years it served as Guatemala's finest hotel, attracting many return visitors. It's located in the heart of the historic center, just steps from the Palacio Nacional. Although a bit faded, it retains an atmosphere of old-world elegance with its art deco furnishings and lovely Italian and Spanish Colonial antiques. Rooms are equally refined, with pleasant décor, private baths, fan and cable TV. The Pan American restaurant here has excellent food and the service is first class.

Hotel Fénix, *7a Av 15-81, Zona 1, ☎ 502/2-251-6625, 6 rooms, $$.* Although located in a dingy area, this is one of the best budget hotels in the city, with clean rooms, good security and a nice area for relaxing or socializing. Some of the upstairs rooms even have private baths. The small and quirky café serves up simple but delicious meals.

Hotel Chatel Suizo, *14 Calle 6-82, Zona 1, ☎ 502/2-251-3786, fax 502/2-232-0429, 51 rooms, $$.* Chalet Suizo is an airy hotel with a central courtyard that's filled with plants and flowers. The rooms are ultraclean (in true Swiss tradition), with comfortable beds and cozy decora-

Places to Stay & Eat in Guatemala City



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AV LA REFORMA
AV LA CASTELLANA
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WHERE TO STAY

- A. Hotel Pan American
- B. Hotel Fénix
- C. Hotel Spring
- D. Posada Belén
- E. Hotel Chalet Suizo
- F. Hotel Ajau
- G. Ramada Hotel Conquistador
- H. Hotel Plaza
- J. Radisson Suites Villa Magna
- K. Hotel Intercontinental & La Iguana Azul
- L. Hotel Casa Serena
- M. Hotel Westin Camino Real
- N. Hotel Casa Santa Clara
- P. Melia Gutaemala Hotel Spa & Convention Center, Hostal Los Volcanoes, Dos Lunas
- Q. Grand Tikal Futura
- R. Hotel San Carlos

WHERE TO EAT

1. Arrin Cuan Restaurant
2. Restaurante Vegetariano Rey Sol
3. Europa
4. Restaurante Altuna
5. El Gran Pauo
6. Jake's
7. Hacienda Real
8. Olivada Restaurante
9. Los Ranchos
10. Pecorino Cucina Italiana
11. Tre Fratelli
12. China Town
13. Tamarindo

NIGHTLIFE

14. La Bodeguita del Centro
15. La Cien Puertos & Café Kumbula
16. Europa Bar
17. Tarboosh, El Centro, Flamenco Tapas
18. Trova Jazz

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tions. The cheapest rooms share a bath; rooms with private baths are double the price. This hotel fills up quickly and is popular with travelers from all over the globe.

© Spring Hotel

Spring Hotel, *8a Av 12-65, Zona 1, ☎ 502/2-230-2858, 18 rooms, $.* With a sunny location, cheery courtyard and reasonable prices, this hotel is the best of the budget places. Rooms are extremely basic, but clean and comfortable, with a shared bathroom and hot water (some rooms are available with a private bath). The cafeteria offers good food at economical prices. You can also do laundry here. Book ahead since this hotel fills up quickly.

Hotel Ajau, *8a Av 15-62, Zona 1, ☎ 502/2-232-0488, fax 502/2-251-8097, 43 rooms, $.* This hotel is fairly comfortable and clean with very basic rooms. It's in a quieter section of the Zona 1. All rooms have TV and double beds. Ask for a room with a private bath; they are cleaner and, generally, more pleasant

■ ZONA 4

Ramada Hotel Conquistador, *Vía 5, 4-68, Zona 4, ☎ 502/2-424-4444, www.hotelconquistador.com.gt, 660 rooms, $$$$.* This colossal hotel was built in 1971 and offers ultra-modern rooms equipped with a refrigerator, cable TV, air conditioning and marble bathrooms. Balconies overlook the financial district. It has two restaurants, three bars, a swimming pool, sauna and gym. The hotel offers a complimentary shuttle service to the airport and can arrange tours of the city and surrounding areas. It's easy to get lost in the Conquistador.

CONQUISTADOR HOTEL

© Ramada Hotel Conquistador

Hotel Plaza, *Vía 7, 6-16, Zona 4, ☎ 502/2-331-6137, fax 502/2-331-6824, 64 rooms, $$$.* The Plaza is a 15-minute walk from the Civic Center and central bus station. It's been designed in colonial style, with arches and a central landscaped garden. Fair-sized rooms are decorated with Guatemalan textiles and feature double beds, private baths and cable TV. The Plaza is a good choice if you need to catch an early morning bus or get into the city late.

ZONA 10

Hotel Westin Camino Real, *14 Calle 0-20, Zona 10, ☎ 502/2-333-3000, fax 502/2-337-4313, www.starwoodhotels.com/westin/index.html, 372 rooms, $$$$$.* You can't get more luxurious than this hotel. It oozes refined style with a lobby decked out in marble, glass, ceramics and flowers everywhere. The rooms are decorated in shades of pale cream and yellow, with matching furniture. The hotel has all the amenities you may wish for, and non-smoking and handicapped rooms are available. The bathrooms are posh, with marble floors, large bathtubs and plush towels. There are also three restaurants (the **Hacienda Real**, reviewed below, offers an excellent steak house menu), two heated pools, two tennis courts, Jacuzzis, a spa and 18-hole golf course nearby, as well as the largest convention center in Central America. Of course, you pay dearly for all this pampering.

© Starwood Hotels

Hotel Intercontinental, *14 Calle, between Av 2a & 3a, Zona 10, ☎ 502/2-379-4444, fax 502/2-379-4447, www.interconti.com, 239 rooms, $$.* This huge hotel is part of a business complex that includes shops, restaurants, government agencies and even a library. The lobby is positively palatial, featuring stately pillars and a sweeping staircase that leads to stylish accommodations. Rooms are decorated in warm earth tones and each has two king-size beds, elegant furniture and other amenities, including data port connections. Although geared toward the business traveler, it makes a good base for general travelers since it is within walking distance of everything Zona Viva has to offer. Rooms on higher floors have nice views of the city.

© Intercontinental

Radisson Hotel & Suites, *1a Av 12-46, Zona 10, ☎ 504/2-332-9797, fax 502/2-332-9772, www.radissonguatemala.com, 100 rooms, $$$$$.* This is another luxury hotel. It features cozy rooms furnished with lovely mahogany furniture that feel more like luxury apartments. They have warm textiles, richly appointed bathrooms and small kitchenettes. The real draw is the incredible view of the city, mountains and volcanoes. A specially designed businesswomen's floor offers discounts on massage and spa services and provides guides for outings.

Hotel Casa Serena,*14 Calle 5-09, Zona 10, ☎ 502/2-368-2209, fax 502/2-337-2972, www.hotelcasaserena.com, 22 rooms, $$$$.* This small and graceful hotel, with its carved mahogany walls and soft lighting, is located along Av la Reforma within walking distance of Zona Viva. Rooms are set up like luxury apartments, with living-dining rooms, cable TV, private baths and fully equipped kitchens. Single Junior suites have only one bedroom, Double Juniors have two bedrooms, and Master Suites have three bathrooms and bedrooms. You may forget you are in Guatemala.

Hotel San Carlos, *Av la Reforma 7-89, Zona 10, ☎ 502/2-336-6055, fax 502/2-336-6056, 20 rooms, $$$$.* This colonial-style hotel has a yellow exterior and bright interior that is quite charming. Rooms have striped bedspreads, brightly colored floors and wooden furniture. The staff offers personable service that makes you feel right at home. Included in your room rate is 30 minutes of free Internet access every day and a breakfast buffet at the **Bon Vivant** restaurant. There's a swimming pool, business center and pub on site.

© Hotel San Carlos

Hotel Casa Santa Clara, *12 Calle 4-51, Zona 10, ☎ 502/2-339-1811, www.hotelcasasantaclara.com, 13 rooms, $$$.* This delightful small hotel offers a tranquil setting in the middle of the Zona Viva. Rooms are uncluttered and clean, with two double beds. The wooden furniture and floors combined with Guatemalan textiles and art give a warm ambience. The grounds feature a lovely tropical garden. A complimentary continental breakfast is included with your room. The service is impeccable in the hotel and at the onsite Middle Eastern restaurant, **Olivadda** (see *Where to Eat*, below).

© Grand Tikal Futura

ZONA 11

Grand Tikal Futura Hotel, *Calzado Roosevelt 22-43, Zona 11, ☎ 502/2-410-0800, fax 502/2-440-4050, www.grandtikalfutura.com.gt, 205 rooms, $$$$.* Grand is a good word to use when describing this hotel, located just minutes from Aurora International Airport. It is part of the Tikal Futura Complex that has 140 shops, restaurants, offices and boutiques. Rooms are spacious, furnished with pastel rugs, blond furniture and white linens. Views of the city and mountains add to the ambience. The hotel also has a colossal swimming pool, fitness center, convention center and two restaurants.

ZONA 13

© Sol Melia Hotels

Melia Guatemala Hotel Spa & Convention Center, *Av Las Americás 9-08, Zona 13, ☎ 502/2-339-0666, fax 502/2-339-0690, www.lasamericashotel .com, 202 rooms, $$$$$.* This five-star hotel is just minutes from the airport and offers luxurious rooms furnished with a refrigerator, two king-size beds, cable TV and terraces that offer great views of the city. They also have fireplaces for those chilly evenings. The spa offers massages, body wraps and other European treatments that you can enjoy while looking out on an incredible view of the volcanoes. There's a pool and gymnasium. The convention center offers state-of-the-art technology, with video links, DVD and audio equipment.

Hostal Los Volcanoes, *16 Calle 8-00, Zone 13, ☎ 502/2-360-3232, www.hostallos volcanes.com, 35 rooms, $$.* This modern B&B close to the airport has a four-bed dorm and rooms with private baths. It has several lovely sitting rooms and dining area. Breakfast and pickup at the airport is included in the rate.

© Hotel Los Volcanes

Dos Lunas, *21 Calle 10-92, Zona 13, ☎ 502/2-261-4248, fax 502/2-261-4337, www.hoteldoslunas.com, 6 rooms, $$.* This lovely guest house is located in a tranquil neighborhood close to the airport. If the hotel is full, there is a second building around the corner. Rooms are clean, comfortable and quiet and are equipped with cable TV. The owners speak fluent English and are happy to help make travel arrangements for you, store your luggage, pick you at the airport and help you find cheap airline tickets. Breakfast is included.

WHERE TO EAT

Guatemala City has some excellent restaurants and dining here is a real pleasure. Reservations in the more touristed parts of Guatemala are a good idea. Restaurants in Guatemala City and Antigua take reservations but on a more casual basis than in North America. Don't get upset if your table is not ready immediately and you are asked to wait. Dining is more leisurely here and restaurants simply do not rush people out the door to make room for someone with reservations. In the smaller regions, reservations are not needed and the restaurants do not usually take them.

© Miguel Cruz/http://travel.u.nu

Between meals, buy some fruit from a sidewalk vendor

ZONA 1

Altuna, *5 Av 12-31, Zona 1, ☎ 502/2-232-0669.* This Spanish restaurant in an old house has a private club ambience. Waiters are dressed in white jackets and offer discreet service. The main dining room looks out onto a courtyard. Private dining rooms are decorated with Iberian paintings, photographs and posters. Specialties include paella, filet mignon and calamari. US $7-15.

El Gran Pavo, *13 Calle 4-41, Zona 1, ☎ 502/2-230-0049.* Just follow the neon sign to the bright pink building serving the best Mexican food in Guatemala. Inside is as flashy as outside, with lots of Mexican blankets and other trinkets on the walls. Enjoy tacos, enchiladas and pollo con mole (chicken in chocolate sauce), as well as dozens of other Mexican dishes. El Gran Pavo has Maríachi music and is open past midnight. US $6-12. Cash only.

Arrin Cuan, *5 Av 3-27, Zona 1, ☎ 502/2-238-0242.* Come to this restaurant for traditional Guatemalan food from the Cobán area, including dishes like *kak-ik* (a spicy turkey stew) and *gallo en chicha* (sweet chicken). Décor is traditional as well, featuring hand-woven fabrics, wooden masks and soda-bottle flower vases. On weekends there is live marimba music.

Rey Sol, *8a Calle 5-36, Zona 1, ☎ 502/2-251-2588*. Located on the south side of Parque Centario in the city center, Rey Sol is a cafeteria-style vegetarian restaurant offering whole-grain bread, healthful sandwiches, delicious soups, tofu dishes and fresh fruit drinks. US $2-5. Cash only.

Europa Bar & Restaurante, *11 Calle 5-16, Zona 1, ☎ 502/2-253-4929.* An American expatriate opened this friendly diner that serves American standards such as burgers, chili, mashed potatoes and large breakfasts with hash browns, bacon and eggs. The second floor is a bar where you can hang out, read, play board games or watch ESPN. US $3-6.

ZONA 4

Cuatros Grados Norte, *Via 5 between Rutas 1 and 3, ☎ 502/2-331-0227.* This two-block pedestrian walkway has become a cultural and nightlife center for the city. There is a strip of pleasant, reasonably-priced restaurants and sidewalk cafés offering a range of food and drinks. Several establishments do double duty as bookstores, galleries and music clubs. It's a good place to hang out, conveniently located close to all the immigration and main tourist offices.

ZONA 10

Hacienda Real, *13 Calle 1-10, Zona 10, ☎ 502/2-335-5408.* Located a block from the Westin Camino Real Hotel, Hacienda Real has the best steak in town. Choose from platters of steak and pork loin served with fresh salsas and jalapeños. There is a good wine selection, and the tortillas are handmade. Try the caramel flan. US $12-20.

Los Ranchos, *2 Av 14-06, Zona 10, ☎ 502/2-363-5028.* This is another great steak house with a colonial atmosphere. Specialties include rib eye and Châteaubriand, but its signature dish is *churrasco los ranchos*, a skirt steak recipe from Argentina. There are some excellent starters, such as the ultra-fattening fried pork rinds. An international wine list rounds it all out. US $12-20.

Olivadda, *12 Calle 4-21, Zona 10, ☎ 502/2-339-1811.* The cozy Hotel Casa Santa Clara is home to this Middle Eastern restaurant. Enjoy tabbouleh, baba ghanouj and falafel in a peaceful patio garden surrounded by flowers and hummingbirds. Other tasty menu items include *kafta* (beef in pita bread covered with tahini) and chicken with cumin dressing. US $4-6.

Pecorino Cucina Italiana, *11 Calle 3-36, Zona 10, ☎ 502/2-360-3035, www.ristorantepecorino.com.* This little corner of Italy offers excellent homemade pasta, brick oven pizza, steaks salads and pasta. The décor is intimate and tranquil and its offers the largest wine selection in the city. US $ 12-25 per person.

Tre Fratelli, *2a Av 13-25, Zona 10,* ☎ *502/2-366-2678.* Guatemala is gaining quite a reputation for its Italian restaurants, and this is one of the best. It has an intimate atmosphere and specializes in Northern Italian cuisine. The carpaccio and fresh fettuccine are excellent, as are the salads and soups. Fresh pastas are divine. The wines are from Italy or California. The service is as excellent as the food. US $12-15.

Jake's, *17 Calle 10-40, Zona 10,* ☎ *502/2-368-0351.* Former artist turned chef Jake Denburg prepares innovative entrées, such as smoked chicken tortellini with a homemade sauce. His best dishes are with seafood and fish, particularly with robalo. The *vaquero chino* is a tenderloin steak with a sweet soy sauce and espresso sauce. You can enjoy it in an ambience that is quite romantic as well; this fine restaurant is a converted farmhouse with lots of wood and a great fireplace. US $ 12-25 per person.

China Town, *Calle 13 esquina, Zona 10,* ☎ *502/2-331-9574.* This is one of the few good Chinese food restaurants in the city, serving delicious wonton soups, spring rolls, sweet and sour chicken and fried rice, as well as other popular dishes. It delivers to hotels in Zone 9 and 10. US $ 3-9 per person.

Coca-Cola
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VENDO
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Restaurant for sale

Tamarindos, *11 Calle 2-19A, Zona 10, ☎ 502/2-360-2815.* This is one of Guate's best restaurants, serving up excellent Thai-style curries with a Guatemala twist. The duck in a tamarind sauce is a highlight. The chic décor includes a Japanese-style garden and terrific music. It's a wonderful place to eat for either lunch or dinner. US $15-25 per person.

NIGHTLIFE

Guate has never really gotten its nightlife back since everything was shut down during the civil war. Things tend to settle down fairly early in the evenings. You'll have to head to either Zona 1, 4 or 10 for a bit of action.

Zona 1 is more downscale and popular with the student crowd, but it's not particularly safe. Plan to cab it everywhere and, ideally, go out in a group. **La Bodeguita del Centro**, 2 Calle 3-55, Zona 1, ☎ 502/2-230-2976, is a favorite hang-out for locals and hosts live music and poetry readings. It's got some great Che memorabilia. **La Cien Puertos**, Pasaje Aycinema, 9c between 6 and 7 Av, is popular bohemian bar serving cold beer and quesadillas. Across the arcade is **Café** Kumbbala, a nice bar showing videos and movies. **Europa Bar**, 11 Calle 5-16, Zona 1, ☎ 502/2-253-4929, has cold beer, second-hand books and excellent food. It's popular with tourists. **Centro Cultural Miguel Angel Asturias**, 24 Calle 3-81, ☎ 502/2-332-4041, usually has dance, classical music and cultural events to enjoy.

Zona 4 has **Cuatros Grados Norte 5** between Rutas 1 and 3, ☎ 502/2-331-0227, www.4gradosnorte.com, that is mushrooming into an exciting nightlife center with many of the old buildings being gentrified into funky clubs and bars. **Tarboosh** is a funky little club that has live music and dance performances like belly dancing. **El Centro Cultura de España** usually has an interesting cultural event every evening. Drop by the **Flamenco Tapas & Bar** for some great flamenco music, wonderful tapas and excellent wine menu. **TrovaJazz**, Via 6 3-55, ☎ 502/2-334-1241, has books, exhibitions and live jazz music Thursday to Saturdays.

Zona 10 is where the rich folk go to party. **Kalhua**, 15 Calle y 1 Av, has been completely redone into an international bar with four floors, good music and a well-stocked bar that's open until dawn. If you want to hear local and regional musicians, head over to **Sesto Senso**, 2 Av 12-81, Zona 10, ☎ 502/2-361-6897, for a great evening of music. For the underground/techno scene, check out **La Ocupa**, Ruta 5, 8-42, Zona 10, and for good old-fashioned rock and roll you can't beat **El Establo**, Av la Reforma 10-31, Zona 9. **La Iguana Azul**, Calle 3-46, Zona 10, ☎ 502/2-331-9866, attracts a young crowd who come to dance to the disco music and sip frothy cocktails. **NYX**, 2 Av, 12-52, Zona 10, is the current flavor of the month for the glitterati and because of that you'll probably have to wait in line to get in.

The best cinemas are found at **Cine Tikal Futura** and **Miraflores**, Calzada Roosevelt, Zona 11; **Las Américas**, Av las Americas between 8 and 9 Calles, Zona 13; and **Magic Place** on Av las Americas; **Cine Los Próceros**, 16 C, Zona 10; **La Cúpula**, 7 Av 13-01, Zona 9; **IGA**, Ruta 1, Zona 4; **Lux**, 11 C & 6 Av, Zona 1.

DAY-TRIPS

Because Guatemala City is not really considered much of a tourist attraction, there aren't many day-trips to take. Once people leave the city, they don't usually return. But Guate is the starting point for many for the following tours. See the pages indicated for more details.

Iximché ruins, Chimaltenango, page 140.

Mixco Viejo ruins, Chimaltenango, page 142.

San Pedro Volcano horseback tour, page 119.

San Pedro Volcano, seen from Panajachel

Whitewater rafting, Río Cahabon, Alta Verapaz, page 272.

Cuevas de Candelería, Chisec, Alta Verapaz, page 282.

Birding tours, La Boca, Santa Rosa, page 444.

Whitewater rafting, Río Los Esclavos, Santa Rosa, page 446.

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On Sundays, almost all the maids in town get the day off. Mostly indigenous girls from mountain villages, they come together at the main square to meet up with friends from home, and spend the day laughing, eating and shopping.

SHOPPING

Guatemala has plenty of chain stores offering the usual fare of clothing and household goods that you can find for the same price at home. The best **arts and crafts** can be found at **Mercado Central**, located behind the Palacio Nacional, 8 Av, Zona 1. The entrance is between 6 and 7 Av. It's busy place with hundreds of booths selling handicrafts from all regions of the country. Be careful though, as this is a favorite place for pickpockets and other thieves. If that sounds too overwhelming, you can head over to the quieter **Mercado de Artesanis**, 5a Calle & 11a Av, Zona 13, ☎ 502/5-472-0208, just across the access road to the airport. It has booths selling similar wares, only the selection is smaller.

Central Highlands

~ The Gringo Trail ~

This area has been nicknamed the Gringo Trail because of the large numbers of tourists who come here. All of the country's most famous attractions are found in the area, including the historic city of Antigua, and the celebrated Lake Atitlán. This region of the country welcomes tourists, with plenty of services and easy access.

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Department of Sacatepéquez

LA ANTIGUA

Antigua is in **Valle Panchoy** (Dry Lagoon), part of Guatemala's Central Highlands, 25 miles (40 km) northwest of Guatemala City.

Expect to be charmed, captivated and enchanted in La Antigua. This is one of the most beautiful colonial cities in the world and it has a fascinating Phoenix-like history. It has endured more earthquakes than any other city in Central America and has always been rebuilt – a testimony to how much its residents love their city.

Antigua is a city of religious architecture. At one point in time there were over 22 religious orders here and each built something to live in and something to worship in. Natural disasters may have blunted some of the original beauty, but there remains enough colonial architecture to make it one of the most beautiful cities in the Western Hemisphere.

Like any beautiful spot on earth, its popularity comes with all the associated evils. Hotels are overpriced, streets get crowded, there is just a little too much English spoken and the locals are bored with visitors. But that aside, Antigua remains one of the loveliest spots in Central America and it's well worth visiting.

HISTORY

Antigua was the final attempt by **Pedro de Alvarado** to set up a royal capital in the Kingdom of Guatemala. His first capital was built in 1524 near the Maya site of Iximché, but the fierce Cakchiquel warriors chased him out of the region. His next choice was at the foot of the Agua Volcano in the Panchoy Valley. After establishing the new capital, Alvarado left for battle in Mexico, where he was promptly killed. His wife took over as governor and, just a few weeks later, the entire city was buried under an avalanche of lava, mud and rocks. On March 10, 1543, Antigua was selected as the location for another new capital. By royal decree, the official name was The Very Loyal and Very Noble City of the Knights of Saint James of Guatemala, *Muy Leal y Muy Noble Ciudad de Santiago de los Caballeros de Goathemala*. It was a rather pretentious title for a settlement built out of straw, bricks and mud.

Antigua grew into its name. Important architects and artists were invited to come and build in Antigua, and the capital grew as the **Spaniards** extended their kingdom from the north into Chiapas Mexico and down into Honduras and El Salvador. When the first printing press arrived in 1660, Antigua quickly became the kingdom's cultural center. At the same time, **Bishop Payo Enríquez** started the first publishing house that became famous for its literary achievements. One of its first books, *The True Story of the Conquest of New Spain*, written in 1670 by Bernal Diaz, is still in print today. In 1676 the first university in Central America was opened. The Royal and Pontifical University of San Carlos remains a prestigious university today.

The first series of **earthquakes** hit between 1651 to 1663, with a final devastating quake in 1666. But these were simply a warm up for the major earthquake of 1669 that destroyed most of the city. By then, Antigua was considered the heart and soul of the Guatemalan kingdom and rebuilding began immediately. The new construction was of a different nature, though. From 1699 to 1707, Antigua became a spiritual center, attracting a number of religious orders from Europe. Soon, friars, monks, priests and nuns arrived and began building cathedrals, churches and convents. **Diego de Porres**, a famous colonial architect, was hired to work on many of the buildings and his work transformed the mud-and-straw city into one of the most beautiful in Central America. A number of the churches and convents were finished just in time for the devastating earthquake of 1717 when, once again, Antigua was razed. And, once again, the citizens started rebuilding.

Agua Volcano looms over La Antigua's colorful houses.
© Shelagh McNally

By 1770, in addition to a beautiful cathedral of ornate Spanish-baroque architecture and an impressive government palace, Antigua had over 30 churches, 18 convents and monasteries, 15 hermitages, 10 chapels, five hospitals, an orphanage, four parks and a university. There were municipal water and sewer systems too. Sadly, residents didn't have much time to enjoy the city's golden age.

On July 29, 1773 the savage Santa Marta earthquakes hit and the city was destroyed yet again. But this time city officials refused to rebuild and instead petitioned the King of Spain for permission to move the capital to the Ermita Valley. In 1776 La Nueva Guatemala de la Ascencion, known today as Guatemala City, became the country's new capital. Antigua gradually became a ghost town as government officials, wealthy families and all the religious orders abandoned the city in favor of the new capital. Only the very poor were left behind and, to survive, these *Antigüeños* moved into the ruined houses and churches left behind. In 1779, to add insult to injury, Antigua was officially demoted and became merely the capital of the Sacatepéquez Department.

During the 18th century, Antigua was largely ignored. Some restoration work was done on the cathedral and university, but the majority of the city buildings were left alone. But being overlooked actually saved

Antigua. Its buildings were not torn down or replaced by more modern buildings, as happened in Guatemala City. In 1944, President Jorge Ubico declared Antigua a **National Monument**, ending almost 165 years of benign neglect. Restoration began on the city and, in 1965, the Pan American Institute of Geography and History named it the "Monumental City of the Americas."

In 1969 La Antigua and the National Council for the Protection of Antigua Guatemala (*Consejo Nacional para la Protección de Antigua Guatemala*) was established to oversee restoration work. Antigua passed through the 1976 earthquake with very little damage, while other parts of the country, including the capital, were severely hit. In 1979, UNESCO chose Antigua as a **Cultural Heritage of Mankind Site**.

This was all the recognition the city needed to blossom into a major tourist attraction. Ironically, Guatemala City has never achieved the same splendor as Antigua and is actually considered to be one of the ugliest capitals in the world. Religious celebrations remain the focus in Antigua. Semana Santa (Easter Week) attracts visitors from all over the globe, who come to witness the most colorful celebration of Easter in the Western Hemisphere. (Read more about this festival on page 32.)

GETTING HERE & GETTING AROUND

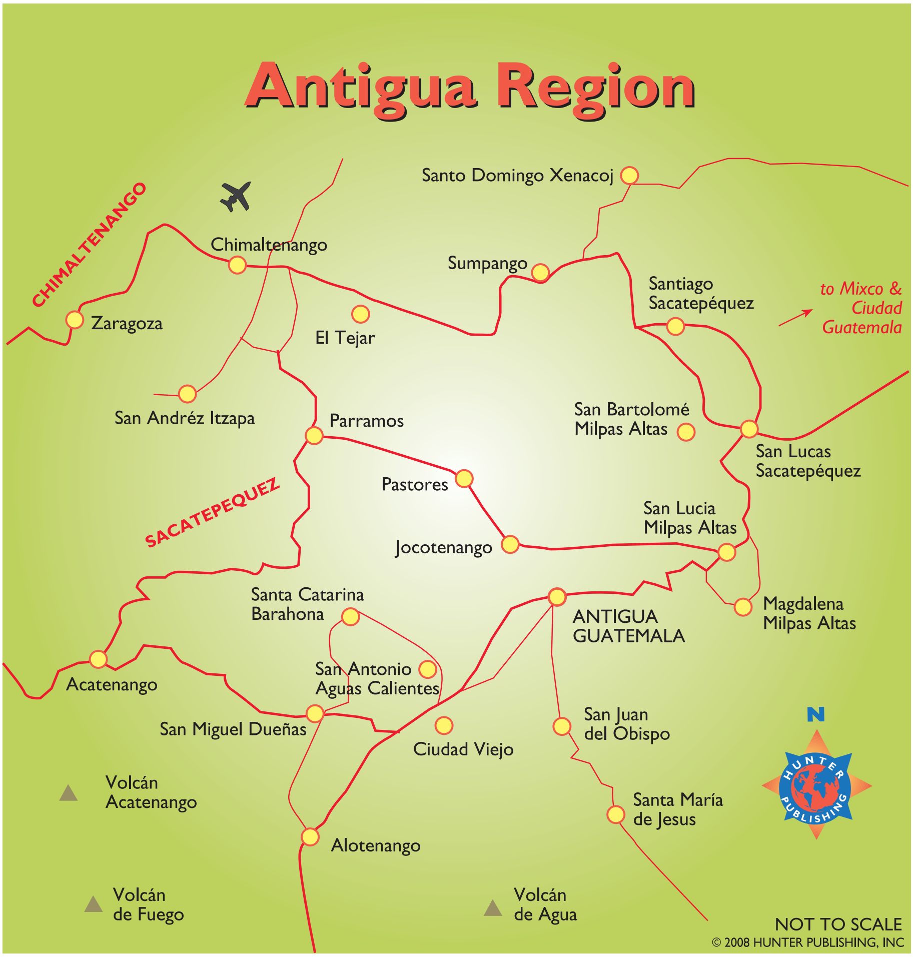
The city's close proximity to the capital and its popularity ensure easy access.

BY AIR

There are no direct flights into Antigua, national or international. All flights land at La Aurora International Airport in Guatemala City, an hour away by car. A cab ride from the city to Antigua will cost about US $40. A much cheaper option is to take one of the many tourist shuttles that leave the airport regularly. They cost between US $8 and $15. You can also take a city bus to the bus terminal and grab a second-class bus to Antigua for US $1.75. Local buses leave Guatemala City every five minutes.

BY BUS

You have to go to Guatemala City and then switch to a local bus heading to Antigua. A more comfortable, but more expensive, alternative is to use a tourist shuttle operated by a travel agency. Most offer direct routes to and from Antigua from all the major tourist spots. On the whole, these vans are faster and safer than buses.


Antigua Region
CHIMALTENANGO
Santo Domingo Xenacoj
Chimaltenango
Sumpango
Zaragoza
El Tejar
Santiago Sacatepéquez
to Mixco & Ciudad Guatemala
San Andréz Itzapa
Parramos
San Bartolomé Milpas Altas
San Lucas Sacatepéquez
Pastores
SACATEPEQUEZ
San Lucia Milpas Altas
Jocotenango
Santa Catarina Barahona
ANTIGUA GUATEMALA
Magdalena Milpas Altas
Acatenango
San Antonio Aguas Calientes
San Miguel Dueñas
Ciudad Viejo
San Juan del Obispo
N
Volcán Acatenango
Santa María de Jesus
Alotenango
Volcán de Fuego
Volcán de Agua
NOT TO SCALE
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SHUTTLE SERVICES

A number of companies offer shuttle services in and around Guatemala City, Copán Honduras, Panajachel, Chichicastenango and the surrounding areas.

Adrenalina Tours, Portal Posada Asjemenou, ☎ 502/7-832-1108, www.adrenalinatours.com, services Panajachel, Copán Honduras, Coban, Quetzaltenango.

Transportes Turisticos Atitlán Tours, 6a Av Sur #8, ☎ 502/7-832-3371, 7-832-0644, www.atitrans.com, has regular shuttles from Antigua to Guatemala, Copán Honduras, Río Dulce and Panajachel.

Gran Jaguar Tours, Calzada Santa Lucía Sur #3 (Hotel el Pasaje), ☎/fax 502/7-832-3149, www.granjaguartours.com, goes to the Mexican border from La Mesilla and Tapachula, Tikal, Costa Rica, Quetzaltenango, Lake Atitlán and Huehuetenango.

Monarca Travel & Shuttle Service, Calzada Santa Lucía Norte #7, ☎ 502/7-832-1939, fax 502/7-832-0082, www.angelfire.com/mt/monarcastravel/shuttles.html, services Guatemala City, Panajachel, Chichicastenango, Monterrico Beach and the Copán Ruins.

Mundo Maya, 6a Av Sur #10, La Antigua, ☎ 502/7-832-9988, can arrange ground transportation to all the tourist spots and has shuttles to local beaches.

Sin Fronteras, Av Norte #15A, ☎ 502/7-832-1017, www.sinfront.com, offers minibus service to Guatemala, Panajachel, Chichicastenango, Copán, Río Dulce, and Belize City from Flores.

Turabnsa, 9a Calle exit to Ciudad Vieja inside Hotel Villas Antigua, ☎ 502/7-832-2928, fax 502/7-832-4692, www.turansa.com, has daily servicce to Chichicastenango, Guatemala City, Panajachel and Monterrico.

Vision Travel, Callejón de la Concepción #3, ☎ 502/5-795-2345, offers private shuttles to any of the tourist destinations, and also operates regular service to Guatemala City, Panajachel and Chichicastenango.

Voyageur Tours, Centro Comercial La Fuente, 4a Calle Oriente #14, ☎ 502/7-832-4237, fax 502/7-832-4247, has customized tours and daily shuttles to Montericco and La Aurora Airport.

Adventure Travel Center Viareal, S.A. 5a Av Norte #25B, ☎/fax 502/7-832-0162, www.adventravelguatemala.com, offers shuttles to Panajachel, Monterrico, Guatemala, Chichicastenango and Río Dulce.

Antigua's main public bus terminal is located behind the municipal market, a 10-minute walk from downtown. Buses to Guatemala City, Panajchel, Chichicastenango or Sololá are frequent and cheap. The public buses are often crowded and run infrequently. Tickets are Q3. Tourist shuttles usually leave from the Main Plaza, although you can also arrange to be picked up from your hotel.

Once in the city, you can walk to almost all sights and attractions.

CHICKEN BUS TRAVEL

If you decide to ride the chicken buses, leave your passport, large amounts of cash, credit cards and jewelry in a lock-up at your hotel. Instead, carry a photocopy of your documents. If you bring anything of value, including money, use a money pouch and wear it next to your skin, i.e., under your clothing. Thieves like to target tourists riding the chicken buses and usually do that buy slicing the lining of your bag and removing its contents. You don't realize anything is missing until you open your bag.

BY CAR

Cars are a nuisance in Antigua. The cobblestone streets make for bumpy rides and parking is scarce. Robberies are also a big problem. Don't leave your car parked on the street, even during the day. Car alarms provide no security whatsoever. The only safe alternative is a private parking lot (*parqueo*) with a security guard. They cost between Q40 and 60 per night. Some people hire the local street kids to watch their car, but sometimes these are the very people robbing the cars.

Car Rentals

If you can, rent a car at the airport or in Guatemala City, where rates tend to be lower. Among the car rental agencies in town:

Guatemala Rent a Car, 4ta Av Norte # 6 (interior of 106), ☎ 502/5-523-9393, fax 502/7-832-9270, www.guatemalarentacar.com.

Tabarini Rentals, 6a Av Sur #22, ☎/fax 502/7-832-8107/08/09, or at **Hotel Radisson Villa Antigua**, ☎ 502/7-832-7460, www.tabarini.com.

The highway outside of Antigua is single lane and mountainous, with many twists and turns. Add diesel trucks, tourist vans, chicken buses and other drivers and you have stressful driving conditions. Drive slowly, get insurance and never drive at night – not only do you run the risk of an accident, you are also prey for robbers.

WALKING

The city is easy to navigate. It's laid out in a classic colonial grid. Streets running west and east are called Calles (Streets). West of the main plaza, they are Calle Poniente (West Street) and east of the plaza they are always Calle Oriente (East Street). This applies even if the street is continuous. For example, 5a Calle Poniente (5th Street West) becomes 5a Calle Oriente (5th Street East) when it passes the plaza.

Streets running north-south are called Avenidas (Avenues). Avenues south of the main plaza are called Avenida Sur (South Avenue) and those running north of the plaza are Avenida Norte (North Avenue). This applies even if the street is continuous. For example, 1 Avenida Sur

(South Avenue 1) becomes 1 Avenida Norte (North Avenue 1) as soon as it passes the plaza.

The exception to this rule are streets with names, rather than numbers, but these are usually very short and run only a few blocks.

SPANISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Antigua is famous for its Spanish language schools, which are big business here. Rates are incredibly reasonable: US $150-200 per week for room and board with a Guatemalan family and four to five hours per day of one-on-one private instruction. The schools usually plan sightseeing trips in the afternoon, while evenings are dedicated to practicing *Español* with other gringos in one of the many bars or restaurants in downtown Antigua. This is a fun way to learn Spanish. Keep in mind that lots of English is spoken in Antigua, so your course will not be a full immersion unless you avoid English speakers.

SPANISH 101

Use the following tips to get the most out of your language school session.

- Visit several schools before choosing one.
- Ask for references and speak with other graduates.
- Is your teacher experienced; does he/she have a university degree?
- Do you like your teacher? There's no point in studying with someone you don't connect with – you're going to be spending a lot of time together.
- Don't sign up for too many hours. Four to five hours per day of learning is all most people can absorb. Any more is a waste of time and money.
- Bring materials, such as workbooks, paper, pencils and dictionaries, with you, since training material is limited in Guatemala.
- Agree only to one week of study at a time. That way, if things don't work out you are free to go elsewhere.
- Choose a school that treats its teachers humanely and pays properly. There are more teachers than jobs in Guatemala so competition is fierce. Some unscrupulous schools exploit the situation by offering low salaries and long hours. It's no fun learning with a cranky, underpaid teacher.

SPANISH SCHOOLS

Although you can find a list of recognized schools in the INGUAT office, it's rather a lackluster affair. Many of those listed have paid to be included. The most reputable schools in Antigua are:

Academia de Español Guatemala, 7a Calle Ote 15, ☎ 502/7-832-5057, fax 502/7-832-5058, aegnow@guate.net.

Academia de Español Sevilla, 1a Av Sur 8, ☎ 502/7-832-5101, www.sevillantigua.com.

Academia de Español Tecún Umán, 6a Calle Poniente 34, ☎ 502/7-832-2792, www.tecunuman.centroamerica.com.

Centro Lingüístico La Unión, 1a Av Sur 21, ☎/fax 502/7-832-7337, www.launion.conexion.com.

Centro Lingüístico Maya, 5a Calle Pte 20, ☎ 502/7-832-1342.

Don Quijote Spanish Academy, Portal de Ayuntamiento 6, in Antigua Book Museum, ☎ 502/7-832-2868, www.don-quijote.org.

Proyecto Lingüístico Francisco Marroquín, 7a Calle Pte 31, ☎/fax 502/7-832-2886, www.langlink.com/plfm.

San José el Viejo Spanish School, 5a Av Sur 34, ☎ 502/7-832-3028, fax 502/7-832-3029, www.sanjoseelviejo.com.

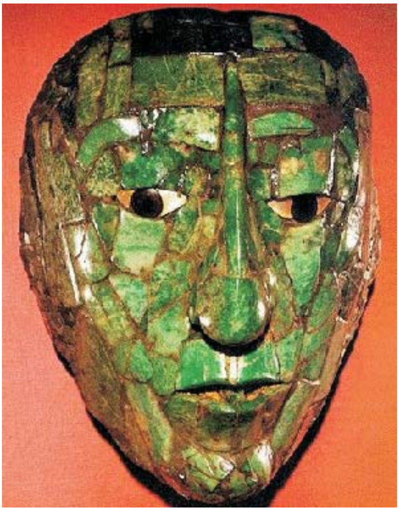
© San José el Viejo Spanish School

Villa lodging at San José el Viejo Spanish School

SIGHTSEEING

Jade Factory, 4a Calle Oriente No 34, ☎ 502/7-832-3841, fax 502/7-832-2755. The ancient Maya revered jade and used it to create sacred objects for their religious rituals. Excavations at a number of Maya ruins, such as Palenque, Chichen Itzá and Tikal, revealed tombs filled with jade death masks, jewelry, nose plugs, statues and other objects. The natural source of Maya jade was lost for centuries and many people dismissed the possibility that mines existed as myth, until **Mary Lou Ridinger** came along. This intrepid archeologist defied popular sentiment and, using old records made by Spanish Conquistadors, identified the source of Maya jade mines in the remote jungles of the Sierra de las Minas Mountains and Motagua Valley. During the 1960s she began her search and by 1975 had reopened the jade mines. She started Jade

SA, the largest jade factory in Central America to revive the lost art of jade carving.



Replica of King Pakal's jade funeral mask

Today, Jades SA employs more than 50 lapidaries who have created a fantastic collection of masks, sculptures and jewelry available for sale. At the factory, located downtown, you can see how the jewelry is made. The showroom has a collection of replica death masks, including the famous mask found on King Pakal of Palenque, Mexico. The factory tour also includes a demonstration of the equipment and techniques used to work with jade. An outdoor courtyard has restaurants, cafés and craft shops. Tours are offered from 9 am to 6.30 pm, daily. Call ahead for free pickup from your hotel. No admission fee.

San Antonio Aguas Caliente Textile Tour and Museum, Artesanías Unidas, Main Street, San Antonio Aguas Caliente, #4c-16, ☎ 502/7-832-3169. San Antonio Aguas Caliente is a little village 10 miles (four km) southwest of Antigua. It has the finest weavers in the country. The *huipiles* (traditional dresses worn by Maya women) created here are famed for their tight two-sided weave that produces an identical image on both front and back. At the local market you can find a variety of exquisitely woven place mats, tablecloths, fabrics and clothing for sale. At the textile museum and store, Artesanías Unidas, you can watch the weavers at work and try on indigenous clothing for sale. The textiles sold here are among the finest and most authentic in Guatemala.

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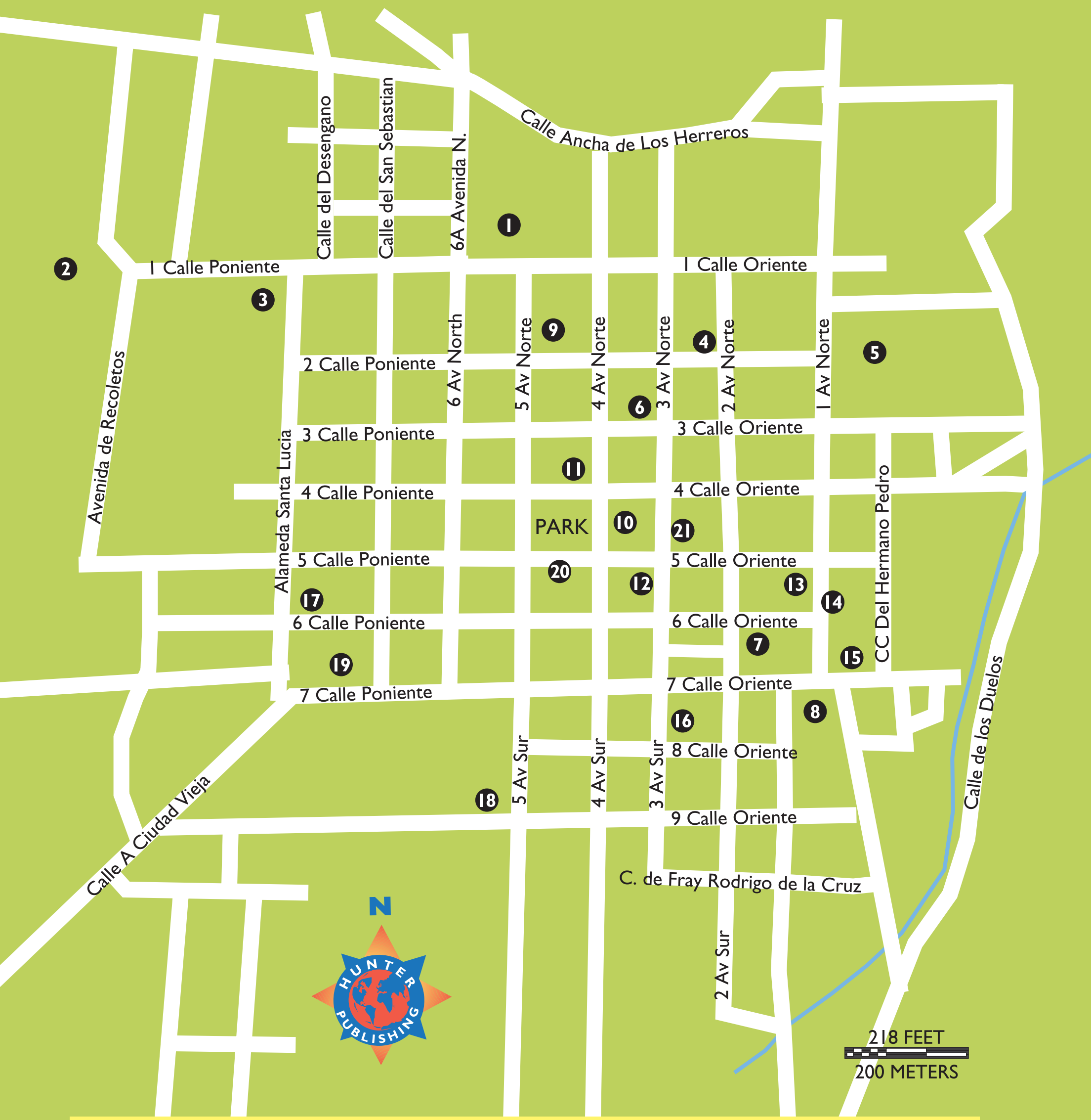
Each village has its own set of colors and cloth patterns, worn by all the women. At a glance they can identify whether someone is from their village or one nearby. While fewer and fewer men are wearing tipico these days, almost all women still do, at least outside the largest cities. The clothes are very complicated to make, so each outfit represents a substantial investment in time or money.

Antigua Attractions


Calle del Desengano
Calle del San Sebastian
6A Avenida N.
Calle Ancha de Los Herreros
1 Calle Poniente
1 Calle Oriente
Avenida de Recoletos
2 Calle Poniente
6 Av North
5 Av Norte
4 Av Norte
3 Av Norte
2 Av Norte
1 Av Norte
3 Calle Poniente
3 Calle Oriente
4 Calle Poniente
4 Calle Oriente
Alameda Santa Lucia
PARK
5 Calle Poniente
5 Calle Oriente
CC Del Hermano Pedro
6 Calle Poniente
6 Calle Oriente
7 Calle Poniente
7 Calle Oriente
Calle de los Duelos
8 Calle Oriente
5 Av Sur
4 Av Sur
3 Av Sur
9 Calle Oriente
Calle A Ciudad Vieja
C. de Fray Rodrigo de la Cruz
2 Av Sur
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CHURCHES

1. La Merced
2. Recolección (Ruins)
3. San Jerónimo
4. Las Capuchinas
5. Santo Domingo
6. El Carmen
7. Santa Clara
8. San Francisco
9. Santa Catarina
10. Cathedral

HISTORIC SIGHTS

11. Palacio de Ayuntamiento; Museo de Santiago; Museo del Libro Antiguo
12. Museo de Arte Colonial; Universidad de San Carlos
13. Casa Popenoe

LANGUAGE SCHOOLS

14. Academía de Español Seville
15. La Uníon
16. Academía de Español Guatemala
17. Español Tecún Uman
18. Idiomas San José El Viejo
19. Proyecto Linguistico Fransisco Marroquín
20. Don Quijote
21. Centro Linguistico Maya

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The museum here offers weaving lessons for those interested in learning the techniques that made Aguas Caliente so famous. It keeps varied hours, so call before heading out. There aren't many planned tours to this area from Antiqua because it's so easily accessed independently. Take a bus from Antigua to San Lorenzo and ask the driver to let you off at San Antonio. The museum is down the main road just off the main square. You can also take a bike tour offered by **Old Town Outfitters** (6a Calle Poniente #7, ☎ 502/7-832-4243, www.bikeguatemala.com).

Ik'Bolay Serpentarium, Calle de los Duelos #4. This miniature zoo is a 10-minute walk from downtown. It has a fascinating display of over 110 species of reptiles, amphibians, bats and hummingbirds indigenous to Guatemala. Learn how to identify venomous snakes (a handy thing to know if you plan any wilderness hiking) and the first-aid treatment if you do get bitten. You can visit with cute vampire bats or go into the aviary to watch various Guatemalan hummingbirds, known locally as "garden jewels." The zoo guides share popular Guatemalan legends and discuss ongoing conservation issues. This is a popular tour for families – but only if your kids like snakes! Open 9 am to 4:30 pm, daily except on Tuesdays. Q7 per person.

ADVENTURES ON FOOT

HISTORIC BUILDINGS

Historical Antigua, Hotel Casa Santo Domingo, 3a Calle Oriente #28, ☎/fax 502/7-832-5821, www.antiguatours.net. Antigua is a city filled with historical buildings, each with a tale to tell. Elizabeth Bell, one of Antigua's foremost historians, offers a fascinating city tour that focuses on the folklore, history and architecture of colonial buildings. The tour also visits sites currently under restoration. The tour is an excellent way to get your bearings and learn more about the history of Antigua. It departs from the Fountain of the Sirens (*La Fuente De Las Sirenas*) in the main plaza. Reservations by phone or e-mail are appreciated. The three-hour tours start at 9:30 am, Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday. US $18.

© Clive Lewis

Historic convent now serves as a public clothes-washing area

© Shelagh McNally

La Fuente de las Sirenas

Plaza Major (main plaza, center of Antigua between 5a Calle Poniente and 4a Calle Poniente. The main plaza is also known as Plaza Armas, due to its history as a meeting place of the army, or Parque Central. It spans a whole city block and is surrounded by buildings on all sides: south is the Palace of the Captain's Generals (*Palacio de Los Capitanes Generales*); on the east side is the *Catedral Metropolitana*; to the north is City Hall (*Ayuntamiento*); and on the west side is the old Trade Arcade building. The famous Spanish architect **Juan Bautista Antonelli** designed the plaza in 1543; it was renovated in 1704. The famous **Fountain of the Sirens** (*La Fuente de las Sirenas*), designed by Miguel de Porres in 1739, sits in the plaza's center. The original fountain once served as a water supply until it was destroyed in the 1773 earthquakes. It was reconstructed in 1936 using stones from the original fountain. This area is a focal point in the city. In the evenings, locals gather here to stroll, talk and generally socialize. During New Year celebrations and Holy Week, many festivities are held in the square.

Palacio de los Capitanes Generales (Palace of the Captain's Generals), 5 Calle Poniente, south side of the plaza. This building is easily recognized by its 26 stately arches. Originally constructed in 1549 and finished in 1558, the palace has been rebuilt several times since then. The beautiful arches spanning more than 330 feet (100 meters) were added in 1735 when the building was used to house the Royal Mint and the royal colonial officers. The arches are the only original pieces to survive the devastation of the 1773 earthquakes (the building was damaged again in the 1976 earthquake). Today, the palace serves as the headquarters for INGUAT (Guatemala's Tourist Office), as well as other government departments. Open 9 am to 5 pm weekdays. The office has many good maps and brochures on Antigua.

© Shelagh McNally

Palacio de los Capitanes Generales

Catedral Metropolitana (Main Cathedral), 4 Av Norte, east side of the main plaza. This beautiful cathedral has a modern church, as well as an old church that's currently undergoing restoration. The foundations of the old church were laid in 1542 using the rubble from Ciudad Vieja, the first capital that was buried in a mudslide. Construction was delayed as the building was ruined in the earthquakes of 1651, 1663 and 1666. It was finally inaugurated in 1680, only to be destroyed by another earthquake. A second cathedral was built in its place and was finished in 1743. Decorated with sculptures, painting and silver created by the artisans of that era, it was considered the most beautiful cathedral in Central America. Tragically, that too was destroyed in 1773 during the Santa Marta earthquakes. As you wander the ruins, you can still see the elaborately sculpted domes, columns and pillars. Two of the entrances to the chapels remain intact. They were restored in the 18th century and are known today known as the Ogles de San José.

Many famous people are buried at the original cathedral, including the notorious Spanish Conquistadors Bernal Diaz del

© Shelagh McNally

Broken column now part of cathedral's ruins

Castillo and Don Pedro de Alvarado, Conqueror of Guatemala. The present-day church is an 1820 reconstruction of a small portion of the original cathedral. It has only one nave (instead of the original five) and a beautiful façade decorated with impressive statues and carvings closely resembling the original. Open 9 am to 5 pm, daily. Q4 admission to the old cathedral.

© Clive Lewis

Cathedral's intact façade

Palacio de Ayunatamiento (City Hall or Palace of the Noble City), 4 Calle Poniente, north side of the plaza, ☎ 502/7-832-2868. Antigua's City Hall was officially inaugurated in 1743 and its double-arch façade with columns of solid stone and sculpted rock walls proved to be quite strong – most of the original building survived the devastation of 1773 and 1976. For over two hundred years it was the seat of the city council and it still houses the offices of the municipal government and the Guatemala Ministry of Tourism. It also has two lovely museums: the **St. James Museum** (*Museo de Santiago*) and the **Antique Book Museum** (*Museo del Libro Antiguo*). City Hall is open 9 am to 5 pm, weekdays.

© Clive Lewis

Palacio de Ayunatamiento

Museo de Santiago (St. James Museum), Palacio de Ayunatamiento, 4 Calle Poniente, ☎ 502/7-832-2868. This museum has displays of weapons, sculpture and furniture dating from the 1600s to Colonial times. Among its collection are famous portraits of the founding members of the city, including one of Pedro de Alvarado. Open 9 am to 4 pm, Tuesday-Friday; 9 am to noon and 2 to 4 pm on weekends. Q5.

Museo del Libro Antiguo (Antique Book Museum), Palacio de Ayunatamiento, 4 Calle Poniente, ☎ 502/7-832-5511. This tiny, delightful museum is set on the original location of the first printing press in Central America, established in 1660. (A replica of the original press is one of the displays.) It houses a fascinating collection of antique books from the 16th and 17th centuries. The bronze cannons outside

Tienda
Colonial

The colorful buildings in Antigua make it a photographer's haven
© Shelagh McNally

were used by the Spanish Conquistadors to fend off rebellious Indians. Open 9 am to 4 pm, daily. Q12.

Museo de Arte Colonial en la Universidad de San Carlos de Borremeo (Universtiy of St. Carlos of Borremeo Colonial Art Museum), Calle de la Universidad and 4 Av Sur, ☎ 502/7-832-0429. This graceful colonial museum is on the former grounds of the Universidad de San Carlos, across from the ruins of the cathedral. The university, the first in Central America, was founded on January 31, 1676 by royal decree of his majesty King Charles III. It survived all the earthquakes, including the major ones in 1773. One of the last museums to leave the old capital, it did not move here until 1832. The buildings have since been renovated and turned into a public school. The colonial interior remains intact and the courtyard features a lovely fountain with Moorish arches. Today, the museum displays an excellent collection of 17th-century religious paintings and statues commissioned by Spanish royalty. It also has a permanent photography collection of Holy Week celebrations in Antigua. Open 9 am-4 pm, Tuesday-Friday; 2-4 pm on weekends. Q28.

Casa Popenoe (Dr Popenoe's house), corner of 1 Av at 5 Calle Oriente,. ☎ 502/7-832-3087. This beautiful colonial house was built at the turn

Casa Popenoe

of the 18th century for Don Luis de las Infantas y Mendoza, a Spanish judge in the Royal Court. Like many other city homes, it was damaged in the devastating earthquakes of 1717 and 1773, and was finally abandoned in 1774. It stayed empty until 1931 when an employee of the United Fruit Company bought the house. Dr Wilson Popenoe and his wife, Dorothy, restored the house and filled it with period antiques and colonial art collected over the years. While the outside of the building is unimpressive, the interior is magnificent, with beautiful flowered patios linked by a series of arched passageways. The kitchen, bedrooms, bath and gardens are just like homes typically built for the Spanish elite. The Popenoe family still lives in the house and keeps it open to the public. Open 2 pm to 4 pm, weekdays. Q14.

© Miguel Cruz/http://travel.u.nu

Mercado Central (Central Market), between Calle de Santa Lucía and Calle Sucia. Antigua's central market is a labyrinth filled with fresh flowers, fruits, vegetables, meat, woven baskets, ceramics, textiles, pots and pans alongside live chickens. On Saturdays, merchants from surrounding areas open booths outside the permanent stalls, covering the whole area behind the market. It's colorful, chaotic and shouldn't be missed, especially if you are a bargain hunter. Open 8 am to 5 pm, daily.

CHURCHES & CONVENTS

Nuestra Señora de La Merced (Our Lady of Mercy), Alameda de las Rosas, corner of 1 Calle Poniente and 6 Av Norte. This church is one of the most famous landmarks in Antigua. The Mercedarian order of monks was established in Guatemala in 1538 and immediately began building a church and monastery in Ciudad Vieja. Both were completed in 1546, only to be destroyed in the 1565 earthquake that buried Ciudad Vieja. They moved to the current location and built a new church and monastery, which had rooms for over 100 monks and an impressive library alongside the largest (at that time) fountain in Central America. Unfortunately, both the cloister and church were destroyed in the 1717 earthquake. All you can see today are the remains of the 80-foot-wide (24-meter) Fountain of Fish (*Fuente de Pescados*), named for the fish-breeding experiments done by the Mercedarian brothers. However, the church was rebuilt and work was completed in 1767. It survived the 1773 earthquakes thanks to the sturdy design by architect Juan Luis de Dios Estrada. Estrada made the church rather squat, with thick walls and small, high windows. The white stucco façade on a yellow background is the building's most striking feature. It has three large naves filled with imposing statues, a majestic cupola and elaborate baroque decorations.

© Shelagh McNally

Cupola of La Merced

When Antigua was abandoned as the capital in 1774, the La Merced order was moved, but the church remained open since Nuestra Señora de la Merced is the patron saint of Antigua. It remains a popular place of worship and is the starting and finishing point for the famous Good Friday procession during Holy Week. The monastery is open 9 am to noon and 3 to 6 pm, daily; church hours are dawn until dusk. Admission to monastery is Q4.

© Miguel Cruz/http://travel.u.nu

Baroque façade of La Merced

Iglesia y Convento de la Recolección (Church and Convent of the Recollection), 1 Calle Poniente at Calle de la Recolección; the unmarked ruins are across the street. Construction of this impressive monastery began in 1701 by the great architect of Antigua, Diego de Porres, and was completed by his son José de Porres in 1717 – just in time for the earthquake, which it survived with some damage. The luck didn't last. The church and convent were razed in the 1976 earthquake. All that remains is a graceful stone arch over a stairway surrounded by the nave's crumbling walls. The monastery ruins have beautiful arches covering thick walls centered around a spacious courtyard. Open 9 am to 5 pm, daily. Q12.

Iglesia y Convento de Santo Domingo (St. Dominic Church and Convent), 3 Calle Oriente 28, ☎ 502/7-832-0140, fax 502/7-832-0102. The Dominican Order came to Central America in 1538 and its missionaries began a humble convent in Ciudad Vieja. Its founder, Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, became known as the "protector of the Indians." Ironically, the order grew into the wealthiest one in Antigua, owning a substantial chunk of the city. In 1701, the Dominicans began building a more impressive convent and church. The original church had two towers with 10 bells. One of the towers had Antigua's first public clock. Both the church and monastery were filled with artistic treasures. There was even an artificial lake for fishing (boats are available on the grounds) and a famous octagonal fountain. The monks then started the College of St. Thomas of Aquinas (*Colegio Santo Tomás de Aquino*), a predecessor of the University of San Carlos. Unfortunately, the church and convent were totally destroyed in 1773 and never rebuilt. The ruins have been incorporated into Hotel Casa Santo Domingo. Open daily.

Iglesia y Monasterio de San Francisco (St. Francis Church and Monastery), 7 Calle Oriente and 1 Av Sur. The Franciscans began their order in 1525 with five monks and a simple monastery in Ciudad Vieja. Like everyone else, they moved to the new capital and began building. By 1689 there were 80 monks. They commissioned Diego de Porres to build them a church, which was completed in 1702. Its high ceilings and curved columns were built in Spanish-American baroque style. The monastery included a lovely chapel and housing for the monks, as well as a hospital, clinic and a complete library, publishing house and the famous San Buenaventura School of Theology and Philosophy. Unfortunately, most of the monastery was destroyed in 1773 and there are now only modeled stuccos and traces of painted murals. The chapel survived and is the burial site of Hermano Pedro de Betancur (Brother Peter of Betancur). It was restored in the early 1800s amid much controversy. Many felt the restoration was not true to the original architecture. The current church has 16 vaulted niches, each containing a statue of a saint or a friar. Several richly decorated altarpieces have paintings and sculptures created by contemporary Guatemalan artists. This church sees a good number of pilgrims who come to ask their Hermano Pedro for help. In fact, many miracles have been attributed to Friar Pedro and in 1980 he was beatified. His tomb is covered with letters, photos and plaques attesting to his many miracles. Open 9 am to 5 pm, daily. Q4 for the museum, church is free.

Colegio de San Jerónimo (St Jerome College), Alameda de Santa Lucía at 1a Calle Poniente. This college was built by the Order of Mercedarians in 1757 and operated as a renegade school until it was closed in 1761 by King Carlos III. He ordered the building to be torn down, but locals felt it was too beautiful to destroy. Instead, it became the Royal Custom House run by Capitan General Fernández de Heredia – a famous figure in Guatemalan history. Unfortunately, most of the building was destroyed in 1773, but it is currently being restored by the The National Council for the Protection of Antigua Guatemala (*Consejo Nacional para la Protección de Antigua Guatemala*), which now controls development in Antigua and oversees all restoration work. Open 9 am to 5 pm daily. Q7.

El Convento de Nuestra Señora del Pilar de Zaragoza, 3 Av Norte, between 1a Calle Oriente and 2a Calle Oriente, ☎ 502/7-832-0184. In 1725, the Capuchin nuns of Madrid petitioned the royal courts for permission to open a convent in Antigua, even though locals opposed it. They were granted permission with the stipulation that they would have only 25 nuns and charge no dowry fees to join (as other convents did). The nuns took it one step further and became famous for their services toward destitute women. The convent (nicknamed Convento las Capuchinas, or Convent of the Brown Hoods) was completed in 1736 under the direction of Diego de Porres. It was spacious, offering many rooms, a large courtyard, garden, orchards and fountains. It also had the only circular cloister in existence, known as The Tower of Retreat for the Novices (*La Torre de retirada por las Novicios*), which remains the only tower of its kind in the world. Both the church and convent were abandoned after the 1773 earthquakes that damaged both buildings. The ruined sections include the Tower of Retreat and are worth visiting if only to see the 14 bedrooms, all of which had their own bathrooms with running water and bathtubs. Below the tower is a series of underground chambers that resonate only when certain notes are sung; no one knows the original purpose of these chambers, but many legends have grown up around this cloister. The Capuchin nuns were an order that followed St. Francis de Assis. They were thought to have special abilities to predict the future and to heal people. The myth dates back to the 13th century when Francis de Assis was said to have cured the war hero Bonaventure. It was thought that the underground chambers were used for mystical practices that enabled the Capuchins to heale the sick.

The chapel has the remains of a 120-foot-long (36-meter) nave that can be viewed from the second floor choir loft. Also visible from that spot are the twin volcanoes, Fuego and Acatenango. Both the convent and church were sold in 1850 to a family who tore down the tiled roofs in order to dry coffee beans. Ironically, this saved both structures from further decay because it allowed them to dry out, thereby preventing rot and mildew. Today, the convent houses a museum as well as the offices of the National Council for the Protection of Antigua Guatemala. Open 9 am to 5 pm daily. Q10.

Iglesia y Convento de Santa Clara (St. Claire's Church and Convent), 2 Av Sur at 6 Calle Oriente, ☎ 502/7-832-0184. Santa Clara convent was founded in 1699 by a group of nuns from Puebla, Mexico. The convent's first church was completed in 1705 and was destroyed shortly afterwards in the 1717 earthquake. A new convent and church was built in 1723 and finished in 1734. It featured a large cloister surrounded by a two-storied arcade with 46 cells, a hospital (with a ward for the insane), rooms for novices, a sacristy, and a dining room with adjoining kitchen. Both the church and cloister were severely damaged in 1773 and eventually abandoned in 1774. All that remains of the church are some rather gloomy vaults that you should explore only with the aid of a flashlight. There is also a series of corridors and stairwells still intact. At the south side of the church you can see some well-preserved frescoes. The most beautiful part is the cloister, which has a two-tiered arcade on half-circle arches and hidden passages leading to underground rooms. The grounds have been landscaped with flowering trees and shrubs around a large fountain, making this a very romantic setting. Open 9 am to 5 pm, daily. Q12.

Local residents washing clothes, Santa Clara

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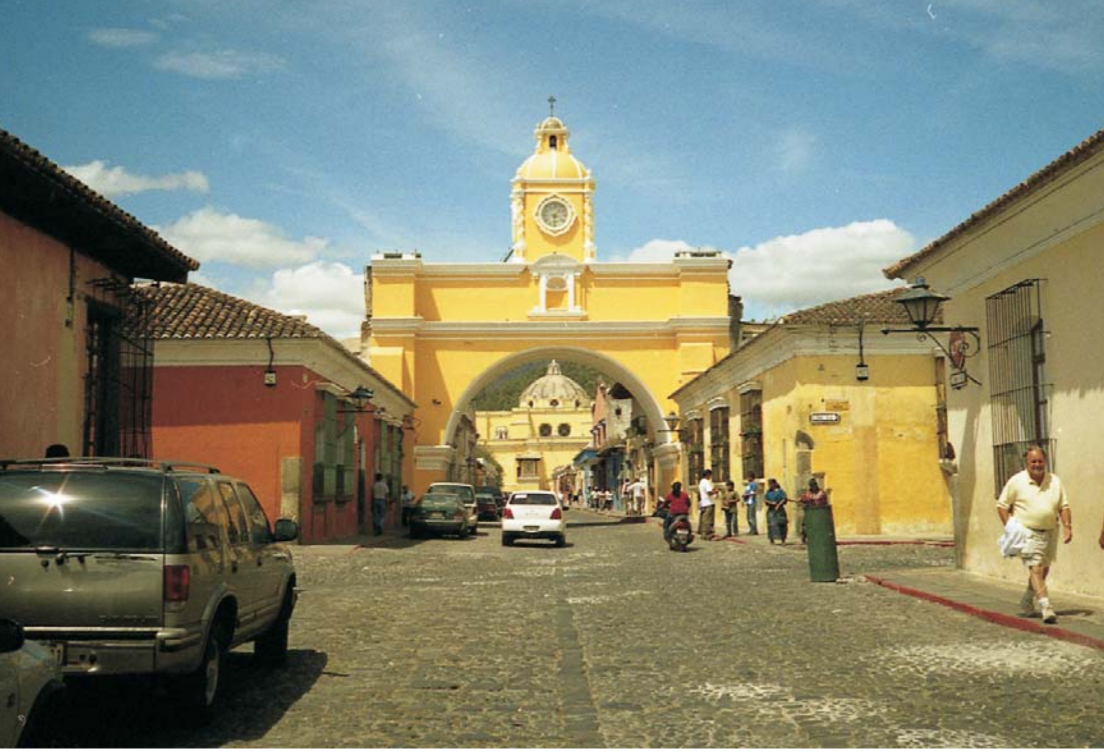
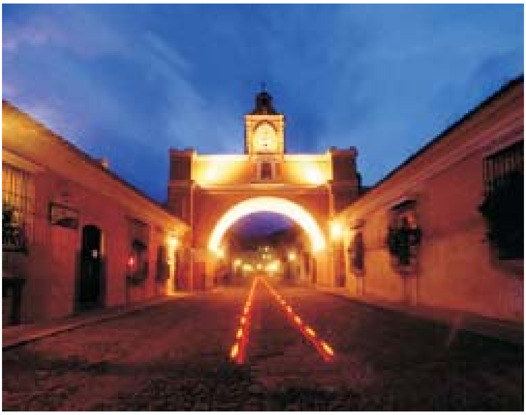


Arco de Santa Catalina
© Clive Lewis



Convento y Arco de Santa Catalina (St. Catherine's Church and Arch), Calle de Arco, between 5 Av Norte and 2 Calle Poniente, ☎ 502/7-832-0184. The cloistered order of Santa Catalina began in Antigua in 1613. Their church and convent was completed in 1647, but by 1694 the order was so large it was forced to expand across the street. The graceful yellow arch was constructed so the nuns could pass unseen into the orchid gardens in the original location. The arch is the only part left of the original buildings – the rest was destroyed in the Santa Marta earthquakes of 1773. A hotel was built over the remains of the convent, but the church ruins remain untouched. Today, the arc has become an icon of Antigua and is, without a doubt, the most photographed landmark in the city. This area is often referred to as *Calle del Arco* (Street of the Arch) and many local events take place here.

Iglesia del Carmen (Church of the Carmens), 4 Av Norte y 4a Calle Oriente. This church first housed the Capuchin nuns when they arrived in 1726. It was completed in 1728, but sustained damage in 1773. The main façade of the church has an ornate baroque style, with triple pairs of columns instead of the usual niches found at other churches. The interior of the nave is just under 150 feet (45 meters) long. There is now a private home where the original convent used to be. 9 am to 5 pm, daily.

ADVENTURES ON HORSEBACK

Cerro de la Cruz (Hill of the Cross), northeast of downtown. The Hill of the Cross overlooks the city. At its foot is the original site of the Hermitage of Santa Cruz (*La Ermita de la Santa Cruz*), built in 1749 for the sole purpose of conducting masses. To mark the spot, a giant cross was erected, hence the name. Today, the park is filled with monuments to Guatemalan war heroes. It has an incredible view of the city with the two volcanoes – Acatenango and Fuego – in the background. In years past, the park developed a notorious reputation due to a series of armed robberies targeted at tourists, but it is now heavily patrolled by both the regular and tourist police and is safe to visit during the day. It should still be avoided at dusk or at night.

You can get to the hill on a bicycle or by taxi; it's about 10 minutes from downtown by car. A popular way to visit is on horseback. To book, contact **rain Forest Travel Agency**, 4ta Av Norte #4, ☎ 502/7-832-5670, www.rainforest.guate.com.

ADVENTURES ON WHEELS

The **Almolonga Valley** is west of Antigua, nestled between Agua, Fuego and Acatenango volcanoes. The village of Ciudad Vieja is thought to be the location of the original Santiago de los Caballeros, which was buried under a mudslide when the volcano erupted in 1541. There is no trace of the old city left and some people dispute the claim. This bicycle tour travels through the valley to Ciudad Vieja to visit the lovely 18th-century cathedral and plaza. It also stops off at Valhalla Macadamia Plantation and visits the weavers in San Antonio Aguas Caliente.

OUTFITTER

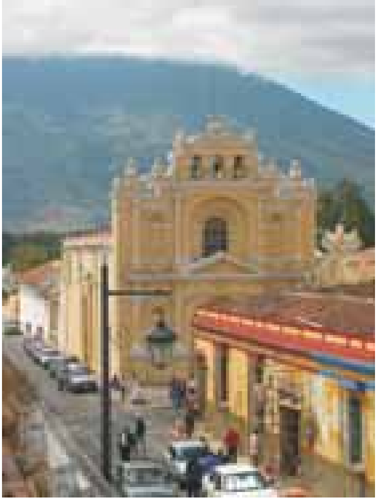
Old Town Outfitters offers this route as an easy, full-day tour. Contact them at 6a Calle Poniente #7, ☎ 502/7-832-4243, www.adventureguatemala.com. The cost is US $35 per person.

DAY & OVERNIGHT TRIPS

Antigua is surrounded by volcanoes and a number of agencies offer day and overnight trips to four volcanoes. Day-trips usually head either to Pacaya or Agua. Most of the overnight camping trips go to Fuego or Acatenango. Day tours leave from Parque Central at 8 am and return by 5 pm. Costs for day-trips to Pacaya and Agua are usually US $7 per person; to Acatenango or Fuego they run about US $25 per person. Overnight camping trips start at US $50 per person. Depending on the agency, you may need to bring your own tent and sleeping bag. Tours depart Antigua at 6 am and return the following day at 3 pm. See below for a list of operators offering volcano tours.

AGUA VOLCANO

Originally known as Hunapú after the Maya sun god, Volcán Agua (Volcano of Water) was renamed after the 16th-century explosion that buried the original capital (now known as Ciudad Vieja de Antigua). This volcano is currently inactive. Located just south of modern Antigua, it is 12,478 feet (3,750 meters) above sea level, making it the fifth-highest volcano in Guatemala. It is also the most perfectly shaped volcano. Day hiking tours start at the Santa María de Jésus Village and take about five hours to reach the summit (see *Recommended Tour Agencies*, below). Unfortunately, there are a number of communication an-



Agua volcano

View from Antigua

© Shelagh McNally

tennae at the summit, so you hike as high as you can to get a good picture of Antigua and the Valley of Panchoy. If you choose to hike independently, hire a local guide. Don't attempt to climb alone – it's too easy to get lost on the trail.

PACAYA VOLCANO

Pacaya is located south of Antigua on the highway to Esquintla, about a mile before the village of Palín in the Cerro Grande-Pacaya-Cerro Chino volcanic complex. It's the most active volcano in Guatemala. Easy access and spectacular views make it one of the most popular volcanoes to visit. Pacaya reaches 8,366 feet (2,550 meters) and has gas and lava eruptions that are spectacular in the early evening. In recognition of its importance, Pacaya Volcano was declared a national park in June 2001. Visitors now enter the park through the village of San Francisco de Sales and pay an admission fee of Q25 (children are admitted free of charge).

The main **hiking** trail begins behind the visitor center. It has *guardabosques* (rangers) patrolling the trail, rest areas, signs and bathrooms. The hike itself is not particularly demanding, but it does take over two hours to reach the volcano from the visitor center. Those severely affected by the elevation (asthma sufferers seem to be hit the

worst) can hire horses (see below) to take them up the trail as far as the volcano for about US $10.

For your final ascent, you must hike about 500 feet (150 meters) up a mountain of charcoal – some of it smoldering. This final jaunt can take between 45 minutes and one hour, depending on your stamina.

You will soon forget your aches and pains once you reach the summit and look down on the tops of mountains and bottoms of valleys surrounded by Lake Amatitlán. In the distance is Guatemala City as well as three other volcanoes – Agua, Fuego and Acatenango – partially covered by clouds. The most thrilling part is standing on the edge of Pacaya and looking down into the red-hot lava pit while surrounded by clouds of sulfur. Don't be surprised to find yourself thinking about hell and damnation while gazing into the blazing inferno.

The descent is much easier. You can take the trail or hold onto your guide's arm and ski down the hill. It will probably be the most fun you've had in ages. Be careful though – it's a long fall to the bottom. Always take a guided tour using one of the licensed tour operators. Do not attempt any deserted trails, no matter how tempting; tourists have been robbed at knifepoint on these trails and many get lost. It's also a good idea to bring only a small amount of money and leave valuables at your hotel. Keep an eye on your camera equipment and leave your watch behind (volcanic ash only ruins delicate mechanisms). Wear good hiking boots and a raincoat, and bring a flashlight.

Pacaya Volcano is active, so check conditions before booking a tour. The latest volcanic activities can be found at the INGUAT office in Antigua's main plaza or at any of the travel agencies.

ACATENANGO VOLCANO

Acatenango, one hour southeast of Antigua, is the third-tallest peak in Guatemala at 13,121 feet (3,976 meters). Although last active in 1924, it still has a few craters emitting sulfur fumes. This volcano has two peaks: Pico Mayor (Greater Peak) is the tallest at 13,044 feet (3,976 meters), followed by Yepocaya or Tres Marías (Three Marys) at 12,000 feet (3,820 meters).

Acatenango is almost identical to Fuego Volcano and, in fact, the two are connected by a passage called La Horqueta (Forked Passage). It takes about one hour of hiking to reach the first lookout at 8,000 feet (2,400 meters) and another 1½ hours to Tres Marías summit. From there, you can continue up for a half-hour to Pico Mayor, where the view is spectacular. Camping is usually done right at the summit, but is dependent upon the weather. The best spot is inside one of the craters at the summit of Yepocaya's peak or in the Conejera (Rabbit), a flat plateau in the middle of a beautiful pine forest. The route to Acatenango begins in the village of La Soledad and it takes four hours to hike to the top.

> **SAFETY:** Don't attempt to climb any of the volcanoes alone. If you want to visit independently, hire a local guide from one of the nearby villages. Solo tourists usually end up lost on the trail and get stranded overnight or longer.

FUEGO VOLCANO

Fuego is also known as *Chigag* (Where the Fire is). At 12,345 feet (3,763 meters), it is the highest active volcano in the country and it has been erupting steadily since 1524. This volcano is usually admired from afar and El Mirador (the lookout, halfway up) is a good place to see Fuego's hunchback summit. This is also a place for camping. A hike to this volcano is usually combined with a visit to Acatenango since the two are connected. To reach Fuego, first take the route starting at the village of Alotenango. To reach the summit of Acatenango, start at Fuego and take the route starting at La Soledad. Visiting both volcanoes is known as La Ruta la Doble (the Double Route). There is a tremendous amount

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Acatenango and Fuego volcanoes at sunset of sand and ash in this area, so reaching the summit can take between four to five hours.

VOLCANOES – RECOMMENDED TOUR AGENCIES

A number of travel agencies offer volcano tours, by bike or on foot.

HIKING EXCURSIONS

O.X. Outdoor Excursions, 1a Av Sur #4b, ☎ 502/5-801-4301, 7-832-0074, www.guatemalavolcano.com.

Sin Fronteras, 5a Av Norte #15a, ☎ 502/7-832-1017, fax 502/7-832-8453, www.sinfront.com.

Adventure Travel Center Viareal, S.A. 5a Av Norte #25b, ☎/fax 502/7-832-0162, www.adventravelguatemala.com.

Authentico Paraiso Maya, 5a Calle #6, ☎ 502/7-832-2071, fax 502/7-832-1838.

Gran Jaguar Tours, Calzada Santa Lucía Sur #3 (Hotel el Pasaje), ☎/fax 502/7-832-3149, www.granjaguartours.com.

BIKING EXCURSIONS

GuatemalaVentures/Mayan Bike Tours, 1a Av Sur #15, ☎/fax 502/7-832-3383, www.guatemalaventures.com, has several mountain biking tours that last six to four days, visiting nearby villages and volcanoes.

CAMPING

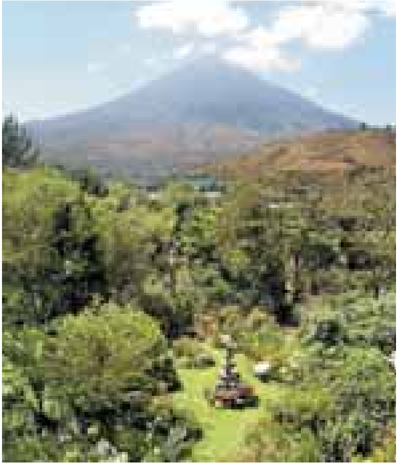
Old Town Outfitters, 6a Calle Poniente #7, ☎ 502/7-832-4243, www.adventureguatemala.com. This company offers the Ring of Fire, a 10-day camping trip. It starts at Pacaya Volcano and goes on to the summit at Agua Volcano, followed by a three-day, two-night hike to the top of Acatenango and Fuego volcanoes. Ticket price of US $995 includes all gear, guide and food.

COPÁN RUINS, HONDURAS

The ruins at Copán are widely considered the most beautiful of all Maya ruins and the site has been dubbed the "Paris of the Maya World." Copán was blessed with a long line of rulers who kept building on their predecessors' visions of the city. The most famous king, 18-Rabbit, also known as Ruler 13 (AD 695-738), was responsible for many of the carved stelae, altars and sculptures found here. A series of tunnels underneath the city lead to older temples. There is an excellent museum at the site.

Copán can be reached in five to six hours by signing up for one of the many tours offered by companies in Antigua. Group travel costs more than traveling independently, but it's also more convenient. Transportation to the ruins costs US $50 per person and overnight trips run between US $150 and $250. See the *Eastern Plains* chapter, page 419, for more information on the ruins, tour companies and hotels in Copán.

PLANTATION TOURS



Finca Los Nietos Coffee Plantation Tour, San Lorenzo El Cubo, ☎ 502/7-831-5438, www.fincalosnietos.com. Due to its rich volcanic soil, Guatemala produces some of the best coffee in the world. Antigua has a number of plantations on private country estates, known as *fincas* (farms). In the past, these *fincas* had a reputation for brutality toward their workers. Today, most are locally owned collectives that grow organic coffee and work toward making the industry more profitable, with better working conditions. Finca Los Nietos (the Grandchildren's farm), started in 1991, is one of these collectives. It offers a one-hour guided tour of the operation starting at a spectacular point where over 1,000 coffee trees overlook Agua Volcano. Your tour then follows the entire process from tree stage to *oro* (gold) stage – so-called because the coffee bean is now ready to be sold. Seeing the entire labor-intensive process is a real eye-opener and will make you truly appreciate your next cup of java. The two- to three-hour tours start at 8 am and 11 am on weekdays and reservations are required. There's a minimum of two people per tour. Q40 per person.

BIKE TO THE PLANTATIONS

Old Town Outfitter, offers a "Sip & Cycle" half-day mountain bike tour of the nearby coffee plantations. You bike on country roads into small villages, including San Antonio Aguas Caliente. This is an easy half-day ride. Price includes mountain bike, drinks and guide. US $35 per person. ☎ 502/7-832-4243, www.adventureguatemala.com.

Finca Los Nietos is four miles (seven km) southeast of Antigua. Take the bus from downtown Antigua to San Lorenzo El Cubo. Go through the town to the crossroads just before the road turns downhill to San Antonio. Walk south (right) toward the volcano for three blocks. Finca Los

Macadamia nut tree flower.

Nietos is on the right corner. Look for the gray wall covered with bougainvillea and ring the bell.

Macadamia Plantation Tour, San Miguel Village, ☎/fax 502/7-831-5799, www.exvalhalla.net. The macadamia nut is delicious and its oil is the key ingredient to all those over-priced anti-aging creams sold by large cosmetics companies. It's an expensive nut because the only source is in the islands of Hawaii. The Valhalla Experimental Agricultural Station was started by Lorenzo and Emilia Gottschamer, who have been experimenting for 20 years with a variety of macadamia trees. They have developed a high-quality, high-yield macadamia tree that is starting to bear fruit and will make Guatemala the second largest producer of the nut. The two-hour tour of their Valhalla operation includes a free facial with pure organic macadamia oil (most creams use diluted oil), a sample of nut butters and chocolate-coated macadamia nuts. You can buy their 100% pure macadamia oils and creams, as well as the nuts, at the gift shop. Tours run from 7 am to 5 pm, daily. Q40.

The plantation is three miles (five km) east of Antigua, close to San Miguel Village. You can catch a local bus to the village and ask the driver to let you off at Valhalla.

TOUR COMPANY

Antigua Tours, 3a Calle Oriente #28, ☎/fax 502/7-832-5821, www.antiguatours.net, runs trips from town. They cost US $25 per person and include a stopover at the coffee plantations. **Old Town Outfitters** also offers a bike tour (see above).

WHERE TO STAY

There are plenty of hotels in Antigua. Some are quite swanky and cater to the celebrity crowd, while others are simple, family-run hotels. There are rooms to suit every budget.

TIP: Be sure to check the room before signing in and don't rent a room where the locks don't look and feel secure.

HOTEL PRICE CHART

Prices are per person

$	under US $25
$$	US $26-50
$$$	US $51-85
$$$$	US $86-125
$$$$$	over US $125

Those are the rooms that get robbed. Second-floor rooms are usually quieter and more secure.

Casa Santo Domingo, *3 Calle Oriente #28, ☎ 502/7-832-0140, fax 502/7-832-0102, www.casasantodomingo.com.gt, 97 rooms, $$$$$.* This very elegant hotel is built around the ruins of the Santo Domingo monastery. Long passageways lead to romantic gardens filled with flowers and fountains. The rooms have yellow walls and are furnished with antique carved furniture, iron candlesticks and 17th-century colonial paintings. They also have antique fireplaces – perfect for chilly nights. Casa Santo Domingo, located just steps from all the downtown shops and restaurants, has two museums. The Spanish Colonial Art Museum displays 16th- and 17th-century art and artifacts, and the pre-Columbian Museum exhibits ancient Maya artifacts.

Posada del Angel, *4 Av Sur #24a, ☎ 502/7-832-5303, fax 502/7-832-0260, www.posadadelangel.com, 5 rooms, $$$$.* Despite the weather-beaten entrance, this supremely discreet hotel oozes polish and good taste. Quite a few celebrity guests have graced its rooms, including Bill Clinton (sans Monica or Hillary). Mere mortals are still welcomed. You can stay in one of the luxurious rooms decorated with colonial art and antiques and furnished with a fireplace and ornate beds complete with large fluffy pillows and duvets. An elegant sitting room looks out onto a pool and garden, which leads to a restaurant, bar and library. The service is impeccable, leading many to claim this is *the* perfect hotel.

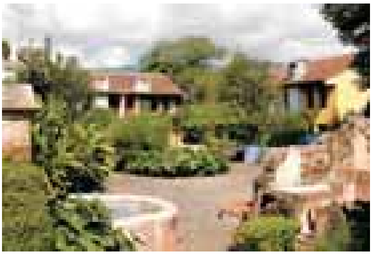
Casa Azul, *4 Av Norte #5, ☎ 502/7-832-0961 or 0962, fax 502/7-832-0944, www.casazul.guate.com, 12 rooms, $$$$.* This serene and attractive hotel is located in the heart of downtown Antigua, just steps away from the plaza. Although the building is modern, it uses colonial architectural styles of the 17th and 18th centuries, with sitting rooms that open into a courtyard and garden. Rooms are decorated in washes of red and blue and furnished with comfortable upholstered chairs and couches, wooden tables and bureaus. Decorative touches, such as ceramic tiles and copper lamps, create a calm ambience. The second-floor rooms have spectacular volcano views (and cost more than rooms on the first floor).

Mesón Panza Verde, *5a Av Sur #19, ☎ 502/7-832-2925, www.panzaverde.com, 3 rooms, 9 suites, $$$.* The name refers to those *Antigüeños* left behind when the city was abandoned in 1774. They were so poor they had to subsist on avocados, which gave them *panza verde*, or green belly. This hotel's handsome entrance features a long fountain flanked by a carved wall on one side and verdant gardens on the other. The rooms are elegantly furnished with antiques, colorful bedspreads and huge windows with wrought-iron edges that give maximum light. Ground-floor rooms open onto a small garden, and second-floor suites have a private patio equipped with hammocks and chairs. Suites are also equipped with four-poster beds and down duvets. An upstairs terrace on the third floor offers spectacular sunset views. It's a bit of a jaunt to downtown, but you may not even want to leave such a cultivated atmosphere, especially since the restaurant serves such excellent food (see review on page 132).

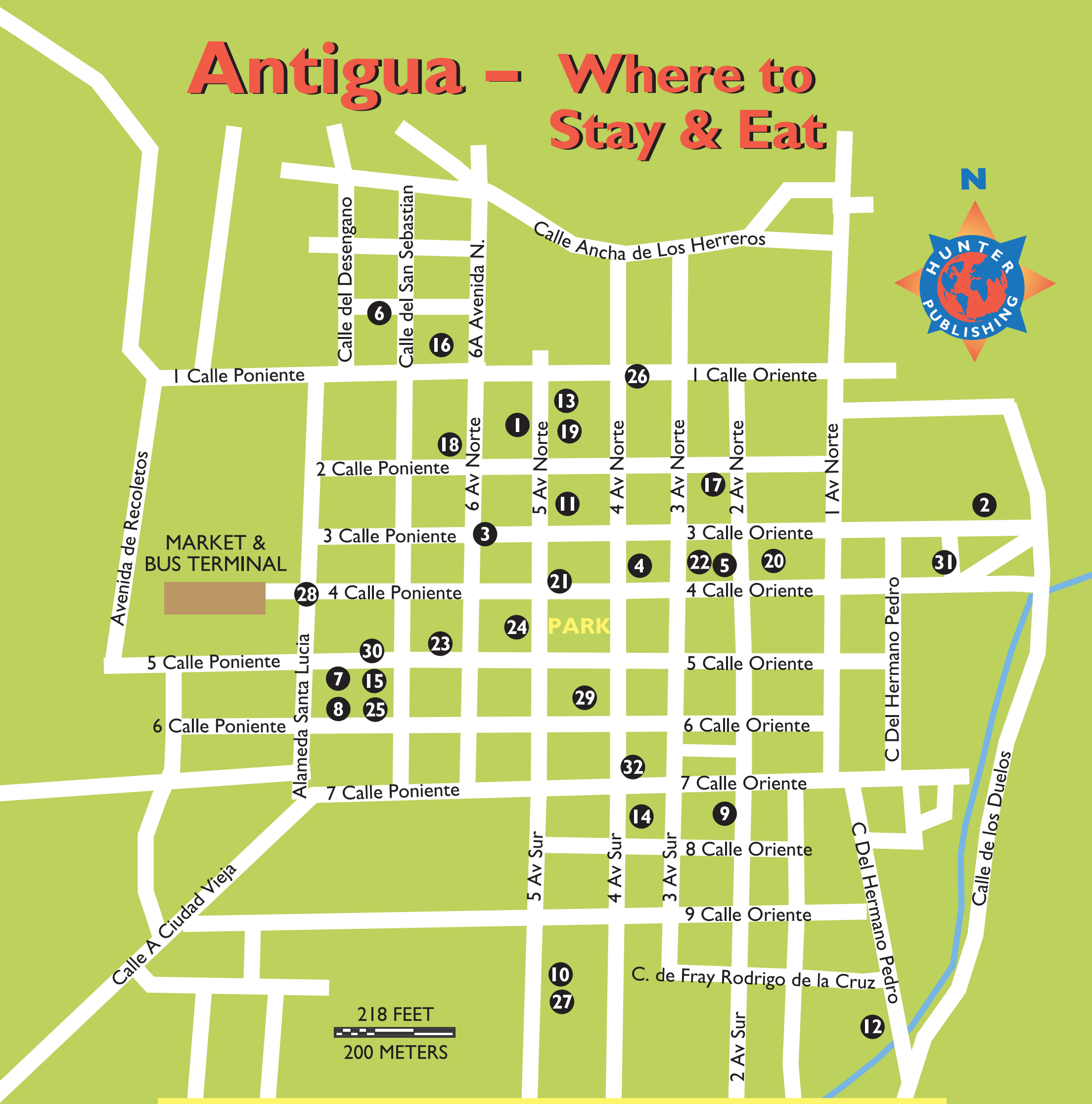
Hotel Posada de Don Rodrigo, *5 Av Norte #17, ☎ 502/7-832-2664 or 0291, fax 502/7-832-0387, http://posadadedonrodrigo.com, 35 rooms, $$$.* Once upon time, in 1707, there was a comely mansion called Casa de los Leones (House of the Lions), named for the noble stone lions that lined its entrance. The lions are long gone – victims of the 1717 earthquake – and the home has been converted into this gorgeous hotel. Much of the original wood remains, including baroque carvings, shutters and doors. Rooms feature original tiles and fireplaces and are furnished with antique armoires, dressers and tables. All open onto a lush patio overlooking a central garden and fountain. Every effort has been made to maintain the original colonial flavor and the effect is both romantic and elegant.

Hotel Aurora, *4 Calle Oriente #16, ☎ 502/7-832-0217, http://hotelauroraantigua.com, 15 rooms, $$$.* This family hotel has been in operation since 1923. The wood and rattan furniture, giant armoires and claw-foot bathtubs help maintain its old-fashioned genteel air. The plumbing, however, is thoroughly modern. All rooms face a large, lush garden that surrounds a tiled portico. You are welcome to sit in a chair and enjoy the garden. Breakfast is included. The Aurora is steps away from all the restaurants, shops and attractions.

Hotel Quintas de las Flores, *Calle del Hermano Pedro 6, ☎ 502/7-832-3721, fax 502/7-832-3736, 14 rooms, $$$$, www.quintadelasflores.com.* The lovely



Antigua – Where to Stay & Eat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Avenida de Recoletos
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PARK
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Calle de los Duelos
Calle A Ciudad Vieja
C. de Fray Rodrigo de la Cruz
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WHERE TO STAY

1. Hotel Convento Santa Catalina
2. Hotel Casa Santo Domingo
3. Hotel Casa Rustica
4. Hotel Casa Azul
5. Hotel Aurora
6. Posado Los Bucaros
7. Posada La Quinta
8. Casa de Santa Lucia
9. Hotel Santa Clara
10. Mesón Panza Verde
11. La Posada de Don Rodrigo
12. Hotel Quintas de las Flores
13. Posada Asjemenou
14. Posada del Angel
15. Posada Landivar
16. Posada la Merced
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WHERE TO EAT

18. Café Rocio
19. Frida's Cocina Mexicana
20. Welten
21. La Fonda de la Calle Real
22. Restaurante Doña Luisa Xicotencatl
23. Restaurante El Capuchino
24. Café Condesa
25. Rainbow Reading Room & Café
26. Café Flor
27. Panza
28. Café de la Fuente
29. El Mediterraneo
30. Restaurante Don Martin
31. La Casserole
32. La Sirada

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gardens here have gorgeous fountains and benches where you can sit and relax. The large, luxurious rooms have cozy beds and linens, fireplaces and lovely garden views. There is a terrific little restaurant that serves Guatemalan food. Also available are fully equipped private houses that can sleep up to five people.

Casa Azul, *4 Av Norte 5, ☎ 502/7-832-0961 or 0962, 14 rooms, $$$.* This colonial home has been converted into an elegant hotel with a pleasant courtyard and small pool. The stylish rooms are painted in washes of red and blue. The upstairs rooms offer views of the surrounding volcanoes.

Hotel Convento Santa Catalina, *Calle del Arco #28, Antigua, Guatemala, ☎ 502/7-832-3080, fax 502/7-832-3079, www.convento.com, 18 rooms, $$.* This lovely hotel is set among the ruins of a 1647 church built for the cloistered order of Santa Catalina. The only part of the cloister left is the beautiful yellow arch just outside the hotel, which is the most famous landmark in Antigua. Front rooms are decorated with hand-woven Guatemalan textiles and local art. Most open up into the lush courtyard with a central fountain. The more modern rooms are brighter, have a kitchenette, and are located in the back annex.

Casa Capuchinas B&B, *2a Av Norte #7, ☎ 502/7-832-0121, www.casacapuchinas.com, 5 rooms, $$.* This delightful colonial home turned B&B is across the street from the La Capuchinas ruins. Each room is individually decorated with local textiles and handicrafts and furnished with antiques and a fireplace. The colonial-style windows overlook the garden on the first floor or offer scenic views of the volcanoes from the second floor. The staff will help you get oriented and can recommend the best restaurants and shops in Antigua. A full breakfast is included in the price of your room.

Posada Los Bucaros *7 Av Norte 94, ☎ 502/7-832-2346 12 rooms, $$.* This well-kept budget hotel offers rooms with red-tiles floors, wooden beams and wrought-iron furnishings. There are two charming courtyards around a lovely fountain. Guests have use of the sitting room with a fireplace.

Hotel Casa Rustica, *6th Av Norte #8, ☎ 502/7-832-3709*, and **Casa Rustica del Parque**, *Calle Poniente #6, ☎ 502/5-841-2830, www.casarusticagt.com, 23 rooms total, $$.* These lovely sister budget hotels are

Casa Rustica

ideally located one block from the central park. Hotel Casa Rustica offers 14 bright and comfortable rooms, eight with private bathrooms. There is a beautiful garden and the use of a large kitchen. Breakfast is included in the price of the room. Casa Rustica del Parque's nine rooms with private baths surround a large beautiful courtyard. There is a full service hotel restaurant offering Guatemalan fare. Both hotels offer Internet, Spanish lessons and laundry service.

Posada La Merced, *7a Av Norte #43, ☎ 502/7-832-3197 or 3301*, and **Posada Landivar**, 5a Calle Poniente #23, *☎ 502/7-832-2962, 32 rooms in each hotel, $.* These sister hotels are within walking distance of each other. They offer affordable, comfortable clean rooms with nice views of the city right downtown. Since they offer single, double or triple rooms, sharing with someone can make this quite a bargain. Not all rooms have private bathrooms. A kitchen is available for guest use. The staff is super helpful, willing to arrange shuttles, tours or Spanish lessons. Children are heartily welcomed at both places. Cash only.

© Casa Rustica

Posada Asjemenou, *5a Calle Poniente #4, ☎ 502/7-832-2832, 12 rooms, $.* This lovely and economical hotel is a converted colonial mansion with clean, comfortable rooms furnished with just a few pieces. The staff is friendly and helpful. A small café serves breakfasts and snacks, or you can walk over to the Posada Asjemenou restaurant (just off Plaza Major) for something more filling. Some rooms have shared bathrooms. Reservations are recommended – Asjemenou is usually full. Cash only.

Hotel Santa Clara, *2a Av Sur #20, ☎ 502/7-832-0342, 14 rooms, $.* Rooms at this small colonial home-turned-hotel are clean, cozy and quite a bargain. It's a bit off the beaten track – about four blocks from downtown. However, it is close to a number of Spanish schools, has a lovely garden and most of the rooms are set up for students, with small desks and chairs alongside the double bed. Some rooms even have their own private bathrooms. Those with shared baths rent for as little as US $5 per night. The staff is very friendly and will help you with your Spanish. Cash only.

Hospedaje Santa Lucía, *6 Av Norte 43, no phone, 10 rooms, $.* This down-to-earth guest home is simple, clean and really inexpensive. Rooms have red-tile floors, high ceilings and basic wooden furniture. Shared bathrooms are clean, but have limited hot water between 6 am and 9 am. Since it's located across from the bus station, be sure to ask for a back room. The Santa Lucía doesn't have a sign, so look for a white arch over a door next to the stationery store (*papeleria*). If this hotel is full, ask about the new and larger sister hotel, Santa Lucía #4, which has 25 rooms and a constant supply of hot water. Cash only.

WHERE TO EAT

EL Restaurante de Don Martin, *4 Av Norte #16, ☎ 502/7-832-1063.* This posh restaurant is set in a restored colonial home. Ring the bell at the entrance and you'll be led to your table on the garden courtyard or in a private room with its own fireplace. The menu is classic Guatemalan cuisine and includes a variety of grilled meats (the steak and sausage are outstanding). Fresh fish dishes often use snook or grouper. For a real treat, try the succulent venison. The service is as flawless as the décor. Leave the kiddies back at the hotel. US $12-20.

Mesón Panza Verde, *5a Av Sur #19, ☎ 502/7-832-2925, www.panzaverde.com.* This restaurant is part of the classy Panza Verde hotel (see review above). Like the hotel, the restaurant is tranquil and classy. Specialties include *lomito* (thinly sliced beef), escargot, salads, fresh fish and grilled meats. Both the dessert menu and wine list are outstanding. This is an excellent choice for a romantic dinner. Reservations are a must. US $15-25.

Café Condesa, *5 Av Sur, ☎ 502/7-832-0038.* This house has a fascinating history. It was built in 1549 for the royal Count of Gomera. A long line of royal tenants followed the count. Amazingly, the house withstood the earthquakes of 1669, 1717 and 1773, but was abandoned when the capital was moved to Guatemala in 1774. Popular folklore claims the body of a servant was buried in the house, apparently killed by a count who returned home earlier than expected and found his naked wife in the arms of her butler. The myth turned out to be true when, during the clean up after the 1976 earthquake, an upright skeleton was found behind a pantry wall. The skeleton has been removed and this house is now a pleasant restaurant serving tasty meals and an all-day breakfast. Vegetable omelets, fresh fruit drinks, quiche, salads and cheese plates are some of the highlights. The homemade pies, pastries, bread and excellent coffee make this place really stand out. You can dine inside or out on the patio. If you are in a hurry, get a take out at the Café Condesa Express next door. US $4-6.

La Casserole, *Callejón de la Concepción #7, ☎ 502/7-832-0219.* This small restaurant is beautifully decorated with peach and gold walls. The windows look out over a central garden with a fountain. Local artists and photographers regularly display their work here, which adds to the artistic atmosphere. The food is French with Guatemalan influences and is extremely innovative. The menu changes every 10 days

Street vendor selling snacks
© Shelagh McNally

and it's always a delightful surprise. Specialties include a seafood bouillabaisse cooked in a spicy tomato sauce and the chiltepe chicken, flavored with a large dried and smoked jalapeño chile pepper. This is a popular place with gourmands. US $12-15.

Welten, *4 Calle Oriente 21, ☎ 502/7-832-0630.* This restaurant is so intimate and cosy, you'll feel like you are eating in a private home. Choose from patio tables surrounded by orchids or those in the elegant dining room. All the vegetables used are organic and there is wonderful menu of pasta, meat and fish dishes. US $9-18 per person.

Café Flor, *4 Av Sur 1, ☎ 502/7-832-5274.* This place is so trendy it may give you a rash. But if you can ignore the pretentious service, you will be able to enjoy some excellent Indian and Chinese food with a Guatemalan twist. On weekends, the restaurant is open late. Reservations are not required. US $5-8 per person.

Café Rocio, *6a Av Norte #34, ☎ 503/7-832-1871.* This down-to-earth restaurant serves the best Asian cuisine in the city. Their spring rolls are incredible and the Thai noodles and curry divine. Enjoy stir fries, salads, soups and more in this sweet little backyard café. Service is excellent. US $2-7.

Café de la Fuente, *4 Calle Oriente 14, at 2 Av Norte,* ☎ *502/7-832-4520.* This popular eatery takes over the courtyard of La Fuente and serves international breakfasts until 11 am, followed by some wonderful vegetarian meals. Leave room for the decadent and delicious chocolate brownie topped with coffee ice cream and chocolate. $5-8 per person.

El Meditteraneo, *6 Calle Poniente #6A,* ☎ *502/7-832-4520.* This tiny eatery is a slice of Northern Italy in Antigua, with the best Italian in the area. Try the homemade pastas accompanied by one of their many sauces. There's an excellent selection of wines. The atmosphere is one of casual elegance. US $6-12.

Doña Luisa Xicotencatl, *4 Calle Oriente #12,* ☎ *502/7-832-2578.* Doña Luisa was the Indian mistress of the notorious Spanish Conquistador Pedro Alvarado. She would be pleased with this popular restaurant named in her honor – it has become a local landmark famous for both its food and art. Come early to get a table either on the balcony, terrace or inside. Early morning treats include freshly baked bread, pancakes, French toast, fruit salad and egg dishes. Sandwiches, soups and salads are offered on the lunch menu. Downstairs at the bakery, a community bulletin board used by ex-pats and tourists is an excellent resource. US $3-5. Cash only.

Rainbow Reading Room, *7a Av Sur #8,* ☎ *502/7-832-1919.* This combination bookstore/restaurant is a relaxed place to come and enjoy soups, salads and other vegetarian dishes. It has an excellent selection of English books and great coffee. The specialty are large and delicious breakfasts. A discount travel agency here may be able to hook you up with some great bargains. US $2-6.

La Sirada, *4a Av Sur #1-4,* ☎ *502/7-832-2912.* Enjoy delicious Spanish and Greek food in this charming restaurant that's set in a converted colonial home. You will be surrounded by antiques and plants while you enjoy moussaka, ricotta ravioli or paella accompanied by an excellent selection of wines. La Sirada is casually elegant. US $6-12.

Frida's Cocina Mexicana, *5 Av Norte #25, near the arch,* ☎ *502/7-832-0504.* Named after the famous Mexican artist, Frida Kahlo, this restaurant/bar serves classic Mexican food in a lively cantina setting. Standards include *taquitos* (fried, stuffed tacos), enchiladas, guacamole and *burros con frijoles* (tortillas with beans). This is a popular watering hole for gringo tourists and at night you'll see more beer and margaritas than food. US $3-6 per person (for food).

Fonda de la Calle Real, *5a Av Norte #5,* ☎ *502/7-832-2696.* Guatemalans from the capital flock to this restaurant on the weekend to enjoy

the traditional food and great ambience. Located off Plaza Major on the second floor of a colonial building, it offers picturesque views of the square. Mexican specialties include *queso fundido* (melted cheese with tortillas) and *caldo real* (hearty chicken soup), while Guatemalan dishes include the famous Antigüeño grilled sausage and *Pollo Pepián* (fiesta chicken). Live music on the weekends. Extremely busy on Sundays. US $6-12 per person.

Deliciosa, *3a Calle Poniente #2, ☎ 502/7-832-6500.* This is a great delicatessen with incredible sandwiches to go. You can also buy cold cuts, cheese, prepared food, dips, fresh bread, pastries, take-out pasta – everything you need for a gourmet picnic lunch. They will also deliver to your hotel. US $3-6. Cash only.

Restaurante El Capuchino, *6A Av #10.* Serves the best breakfasts in the city. You can enjoy great coffee with fresh pastries or dive into one of their huge omelettes with fresh cheese and herbs. Lunch and dinner are also offered; the menu is light, with soups, salads and pastas. US $2-5.

NIGHTLIFE

BARS & DISCOS

Antigua is the exception in Guatemala for nightlife. There is plenty to do here and the bars tend to stay open later than in other cities. The main *viva zona* (lively zone), where most of the popular bars can be found, is centered around the arch. The loud and rowdy sports bar **Mono Loco**, 2 Av Norte 6B, ☎ 502/7-832-4235, is one of the most popular nightspots where gringos gather. **No Sé**, 1 Av Norte, 11C (no phone) is a funky bar with an open mike and local musicians. It's got a great selection of tequila. **La Peña de Sol Latino**, 5a Calle Poniente #15-C, ☎ 502/7-832-1668, has live music every evening with musicians from all over Latin America. Another great place to listen

© Shelagh McNally

Los Arco

to music and watch the sunset is **Café Sky**, 6a Calle and 1a Av, ☎ 502/7-832-7300. The best place to dance is **La Casbah Disco**, 5a Av Norte #30, ☎ 502/7-832-2640. It plays everything from techno to disco until the wee hours in the morning. A perennial favorite is **Frida's Bar**, 5a Av Norte #29, Calle del Arco, ☎ 502/7-832-0504, for its well-stocked bar and pleasing ambience. Antigua's first Irish pub, **Reilly's**, 5 Av Norte 31 (no phone) has become a popular gathering spot for tourists and locals alike. It serves great fish and chips.

MOVIES

There are no movie theaters in town but there are plenty of video houses showing a wide variety of international films for around US $1. 50. The most popular are: **Cine Café**, 7a Calle Pte 22; **Cinema Bistro**, 5a Av Sur 14; **Cinema Tecún Umán**, 6a Calle Pte 34A.

CULTURAL EVENTS

Proyecto Cultural El Sitio, 5a Calle Pts 34A, ☎ 502/7-832 3037 presents a variety of cultural events that include theater, concerts, poetry readings and art exhibitions. They post a weekly schedule.

Department of Chimaltenango

In their rush to reach Panajachel and Chichicastenango, many tourists overlook this lovely plateau in the Sierra Madre mountains. There aren't many tourist services here, but there are some fascinating Indian villages to explore. It is primarily a rural area with some of the largest coffee plantations in Guatemala. It also grows corn, wheat, oranges, lemons and avocados. And it offers some interesting communities. San Juan Comalapa is known for its naïve painters, while Santa Apolonia is visited for its pre-Hispanic-style ceramics. The dusty village of San Andrés Iztapa is where followers of Maximón congregate and Tecpan is the jumping-off point for visits to the ancient ruins of two great Cakchiquel Maya cities: Iximché and Mixco Viejo.

HISTORY

This area has a tragic history dating back to the earliest visit by the Spanish Conquistadors, who chose the area as their first base in Guatemala. This brought open conflict with the native **Cakchiquel**, who were fierce warriors and not happy with being invaded. But even they could not stop the tide of European settlers who came here to start up farms and ranches. By the early 1800s most of the native population was driven off the land into the hills and highlands. In 1976, this area was one of the hardest hit by the scorched-earth policy and many villages were wiped out. To compound the problems, the area was then targeted by the US-sponsored military for a "cleansing" of all communists. Six hundred and twenty eight villages were destroyed and hundreds of people went missing. After lobbying the government for years, locals are finally getting some justice. In July 2002, the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation, along with archeologists and other human-rights workers, started excavations to find the remains of those innocents slaughtered during the bloody cleansing. It is hoped that the evidence will be used to charge former dictators Lucas García and Ríos Montt with genocide and crimes against humanity. The international community, led by Rigoberta Menchu, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, is watching the progress carefully. If you would like to find out more about the project visit the Fundación/Equipo de Antropología Forense de Guatemala (F/EAFG) website at http://garnet.acns.fsu.edu/~sss4407/EAFG.htm. The Guatemala Solidarity Committee of Seattle

(GUASO), www.guaso.org, has been following the proceedings as well and has regular updates on its site.

SAN ANDRÉS ITZÁPA

A lifesize doll of San Simón (Maximón)

San Andrés is one of the first villages you reach after leaving Antigua on the Centroamérica Highway (CA-1). This community is home to the bad boy **San Simón**, more commonly known as **Maximón**, a rogue saint who likes booze, cigars and women of the night. In fact, it is believed he will grant prayers only after being offered a good cigar or some money. In his small chapel on top of the hill, you will find Maximón wearing his hat rather rakishly, covered with neckties and scarves, surrounded by burning candles and incense. The walls are covered with offerings and cards of thanks to this favorite *Ladino* saint. Before entering the chapel you can have a soul-cleansing ritual, or *limpia*, performed by one of the local shamans. This involves being covered with herbal smoke and then being blessed with some of the local *aguardiente* (firewater). You are expected to take a swig yourself; Maximón will understand if you are a bit tipsy. If he's not in the chapel, ask one of the locals where he might be. Sometimes he gets restless and goes out visiting. Don't bother Maximón or ask for any favors after sunset. He likes to rest at night.

San Andrés is 4.3 miles (seven km) from the main highway and can be reached by taking a *colectivo* bus from Chimaltenango. There are no hotels in the village, so allow enough time to get back to your hotel in either Tecpan or Comalapa.

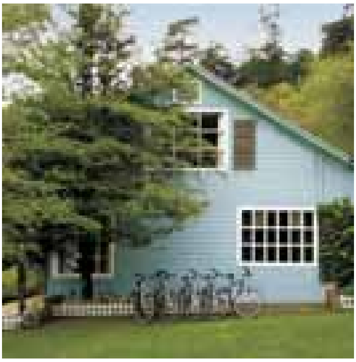
SAN JUAN COMALAPA

This town is 14 miles (24 km) from Chimaltenango village. It is of historical importance since it was the birthplace of the Guatemalan composer, **Don Rafaél Álvarez Ovalle**, who wrote the country's national anthem. There is a small fountain dedicated to him in the central square.

The village is equally famous for its **primitive artists**. In 1920, Andres Curuchich began painting simple village scenes using a naïve style. In the 1950s his work became quite popular, first in Guatemala and then throughout the States. Curuchich even had several shows in New York and Los Angeles. His success has inspired other local artists and there is now a collective of about 50 artists displaying their work in a number of small galleries in the center square.

The traditional **weaving** in San Juan Comalapa is also notable. The women use a silk thread combined with natural brown thread known as "cuyuxcate" to produce beautifully-styled fabrics with geometric patterns. The best day to come here is Tuesday, market day, when everyone brings their wares and the village is bustling with color and activity.

Buses run every hour from Chimaltenango, even more frequently on market day. The trip takes about 30 minutes along a somewhat decent road.



Casa Xara, ☎ *502/2-363-3711, fax 502/2-368-3086, www.molinohelvetia.com.* This enchanting small hotel is within Molino Helvetia Private Natural Reserve nestled in the foothills of the Sierra Madre and only a few miles from the archaeological site of Iximché. Originally a wheat farm, (the mill just closed in 2005), the 19th-century wooden country home has four fresh, elegant and comfortable rooms. Guests are welcome to hike or bike through the designated trails to bird watch. The chapel on site is set up for family or company events.

TECPAN

Tecpan is a sleepy little village with nothing much to do. It is thought to have been the first headquarters of the Spanish Conquistadors who came to the area in 1524. Its biggest draw is its proximity to the ruins of Iximché and Mixco Viejo. The residents here are direct descendants of the fierce Cakchiquel Maya, but they are much calmer these days and rather than waging war spend their time as farmers. You won't hear much Spanish spoken here.

Like many villages in Guatemala, the market is the central feature of the community, and Tecpan's is the largest in the area. It's held every Thursday, Saturday and Sunday, and *everyone* comes to sell their wares. It's mostly produce, but it's the best you will find in the highlands. The weavers of Comalapa and potters of Santa Apolonia also bring their goods and you may be able to get some incredible bargains. Not many tourists make it out this way, so be warned that you may be an object of shy curiosity.

Tecpan is on the main highway, so it's easy to reach via public bus. You can take any bus traveling along the Inter-American Highway between Chimaltenango and Los Encuentros and asked to be dropped off. The town is .6 miles (one km) from the highway.

MAYA RUINS

IXIMCHÉ RUINS

Overview of Ixichme ruins

Ixmiche is a late Postclassic city built by the Cakchiquel Maya in AD 1470 for their capital. At the time of its construction, the Cakchiquel Maya were at war with the Quiché Maya and most of this hilltop city was surrounded by a nine-foot-deep (2.7-meter) moat. Inside are a number of structures, including a pyramid that is covered with jungle, a ball court, patio and platforms.

HISTORY

For much of the 15th century, the **Cakchiquels** were ruled by the **Quiché**. But when King Quicab died in 1475, the Cakchiquel successfully fought the Quiché for their independence. Other tribes followed suit. But independence did not bring peace, as the various cities began to fight over land. When **Pedro de Alvarado** showed up in 1523, he used this to his advantage, making alliances with each tribe and playing one against the other. First the Cakchiquel were his allies in his fight against the Quiché. They helped him overthrow the great Quiché leader Tecum Uman. The Pipil were his next friends. They helped him overthrow the Pocoman Maya who, in turn, helped him take control of the Cakchiquel. In 1524, Alvarado declared the area around Tecpan (including Iximché) his new Guatemalan Kingdom. He called the city **Santiago de Caballeros de Guatemala**. At first, the Cakchiquel supported the Spanish, but when they saw their king reduced to a servant and their tributes to the Spanish make them poor, they stood up in battle and fought a three-year guerilla campaign. Alvarado gave up and moved his capital farther east to Antigua.

EXPLORING THE RUINS

The ruins consist of four main plazas with several pyramids. Many of the original foundations are made up of stone and, for the most part, these remain intact. Plazas A and C have the most structures clustered around them. Temple 2, also in this area, has murals resembling drawings found in the Dresden Codice. Very little sculpture has been found at this site, but digs have uncovered some interesting relics such as grinding stones, obsidian knives and the bones of sacrificial victims. Today, Iximché is a very peaceful site; it is protected on three sides by steep slopes covered with pine trees. On weekends, locals come to picnic with their families. The Maya still use this place for worship and you can see their offerings scattered about the ruins.

WHERE TO STAY IN TECPAN

The hotels here are very basic. None accept credit cards. All have small restaurants that serve the usual Guatemala country fare; roast chicken is a popular dish.

Hotel Villa de Don Pancho, *1a Av 2-57, Zona 3, ☎ 502/7-840-3202/04, www. viajeros. com/empresa-hotelavillade-donpancho.* This colonial hotel offers comfortable rooms with plenty of hot water and orthopedic beds. There is a spa and gym on site and the restaurant serves a wonderful pork roast. The hotel offers tours to the ruins.

Destur, *Km 85.5, Carretera Interamericana, ☎/fax 502/7-839-1631, 15 rooms, $$.* This is a rustic-looking hotel that vaguely resembles a Swiss mountain resort. It has cute wooden shutters and a cozy dining room. The gardens are pleasant and overlook the mountains. Rooms are spacious and clean, with two double beds, private baths with hot water and cable TV. The swimming pool is gigantic. Ask for a back room to lessen the noise from the highway. The hotel is geared toward tourists and the staff will help you reach the ruins.

San Cristóbal las Flores, *Km 89.5 Carretera Interamericana, ☎/fax 502/7-839-1650, 12 rooms, $.* Just up the road from its competitor across the street, this hotel is almost identical. It is trying for that rustic charm and, for the most part, it succeeds. Rooms are on the small side, but clean, with two double beds, private bath and cable TV. It is geared toward families and attracts locals who come to Tecpan for the weekend.

GETTING HERE: *The ruins are 3.1 miles (five km) south of Tecpan. You can walk to them via the main road that goes past the health clinic and eventually turns into fields. It takes about an hour to complete the route and it's best done in the early morning when the sun is not too hot. Bring something to eat and drink (the snack bar is usually closed). You can also hire a taxi to take you out to the ruins at a cost of about Q50 or $8, or hitch a ride with one of the local trucks passing by. If you have a large group, you may be able to find a tour service in Antigua to customize a trip for you.*

MIXCO VIEJO RUINS

Close by Iximché is the capital of the **Pokoman Maya**. This Postclassic city is set on a high ridge surrounded by steep cliffs. When it was built in AD 1250, it was called Saqik'ajol Nimakaqapek.

HISTORY

It is thought this city was built between AD 900 and 1200. Because of its proximity to the obsidian mines of the San Martin Jilotepeque and Río Motagu, in combination with the alliance to the powerful city of Kaminal Juyú, Mixco Viejo became a prominent commercial center. But it was constantly at war with its neighbors, mostly due to the actions of its king. A major war broke out between the Ixmiché and Mixco when the king of Mixco *ate* a bride that was sent to him by the king of Ixmiche. (The bride was a royal daughter and it was hoped she would make an alliance with the city, rather than being a meal.) Iximché was not successful in overtaking the city because of its natural fortifications.

When the Spanish arrived they, too, were unable to gain control of the fortress. Alvarado attacked the city with an army of Tlaxcala Indians from Mexico. The Spanish killed over 200 Pokoman, but were still unable to take the city. The Maya simply retreated up the hill. The siege lasted for seven months, according to the Spanish historian Fuentes y Guzmán who witnessed the city's downfall, until the Spanish captured two of the Pokoman and tortured them into revealing the secret tunnels that allowed them to come and go undetected. Alvarado and his men used the tunnels for a surprise attack and the city was defeated. It was one of the last cities to fall to Alvarado.

EXPLORING THE RUINS

This city is a true fortress created with only two entrances. The main entrance was a narrow causeway that went through a series of deep ravines. The second was a secret tunnel that emerged far from the city by Río Pixcayá.

More than 120 structures have been identified so far, including nine temples, numerous altars and two large sunken ball courts. These have

© Fernando Reyes

Mixco Viejo ruins

room for over 9,000 people, leading archeologists to theorize that Mixco was also a central ceremonial site at some point. There is an intact marker in one of the courts carved with the symbol of Kukulcan, the serpent god. Excavations have also revealed several methods of construction and several structures use stone blocks and clay instead of the usual limestone. Some structures still have the original paint and it appears the city had more murals than stelae. This would explain why so little of the original art remains as the paint from the murals would not have withstood the elements as well as carved stelae. The buildings at Mixco are much smaller than those at other Maya sites. Its two main pyramids rise to only 100 feet (30 meters) and have flat tops.

You will likely have the ruins to yourself since few people make it out this far. The setting is quite spectacular and the on-site museum has an interesting collection of various artifacts and art found here.

GETTING HERE: *Although this ruin is quite close to Guatemala City, it is difficult to reach. Take a bus from Chimaltenango north to the village of Montufúr and then to Pachalum. (You can catch the bus directly to Pachalum from Guatemala City.) The ruins are located between these two villages. It's a rough route, but one that is quite lovely because it follows Río Pixcayá along valleys and mountains.*

MIXCO VIEJO TOUR COMPANIES

You can also get to the ruins along Río Motagua. **Maya Expeditions**, 15 Calle 1-91, Zona 10, local 104, Guatemala City, ☎ 502/2-363-4955, fax 502/337-4660, www.mayaexpeditions.com, offers a Rapids 'n Ruins journey that travels along the river. The trip leaves from Guatemala City and takes a full day. You should be in reasonable shape to participate. Price starts at US $122 per person.

Unless you want to spend the night at the ruins or in Chimaltenango, you should probably rent a car or find an tour agency that will assist you. Most of the agencies don't have scheduled trips to Mixco Viejo, but they will be happy to arrange something for you.

Department of Sololá

The department of Sololá is bordered to the north by the departments of Totonicapán and Quiché; to the east by Chimaltenango; to the southwest by Suchitepequez; and to the west by Quezaltenango. It has the largest and most varied Maya population with the highest number of indigenous languages still in use. It covers 19 municipalities in total, although most tourists usually visit only Lake Atitlán.

This department remains primarily agricultural, cultivating corn, beans, squash and some fruit. Weaving is the second major industry and almost every village has its own techniques for creating highly stylized shirts, trousers, huipils, skirts, blouses, sashes, purses and fabrics. It is one of the most popular destinations in Guatemala.

Volcano looming over Lake Atitlán

Lake Atitlán, a deep, wide lake surrounded by volcanoes, is probably the most famous place in Guatemala and it has been attracting visitors for hundreds of years. They are drawn by the panorama of the lake, sky and volcanoes. Located in the Western Highlands, which is often called the heart of the Maya world, Lake Atitlán sits 5,128 feet (1,563 meters) above sea level. It is wide and deep, covering 49.3 square miles (127 sq km) and reaching down 1,049 feet (320 meters). Along the south shore are three enormous volcanoes – **Atitlán** at 11,670 feet (3,557 meters), **Tolimán** at 10,361 feet (3,158 meters) and **San Pedro** at 9,908 feet (3,020 meters).

Surrounding the lake are many small indigenous villages where natives still wear traditional dress and continue a traditional way of life without much Western influence. **Panajachel** is the exception. It has a large international community and makes a good base for exploring the other villages around the lake, such as Santiago Atitlán, San Pedro, San Juan la Laguna and Sololá.

You will read many quotes about how Lake Atitlán is considered one of the most beautiful places on earth – in case you can't figure this out on your own.

> ***Lake Atitlán was hit fairly heavily by Hurricane Stan. Many communities were overwhelmed with landslides and heavy rains. The worst hit were the small villages of Panabaj and Tzanchaj near Santiago Atitlán. On Oct 5, 2005, mud poured off the saturated slops of the nearby volcano, burying the town's population, numbered at 3,000. Communities around the lake have been slowly rebuilding, but locals are still suffering. Your tourist dollars will help with the recovery.***

GETTING HERE & GETTING AROUND

Most of the Sololá buses and shuttles head for Panajachel. Although many of the villages around the lake have roads to them, it is still faster and more comfortable to reach them by boat from Panajachel.

SOLOLÁ

With a population of 9,000, Sololá is one of the largest Maya cities in Guatemala. It sits 1,968 feet (600 meters) above the lake and offers incredible views of the area. Originally known as Cakhay, Sololá was built 19.6 miles (six km) from Iximché, the capital of the Cakchiquel Maya. In 1517, the city was captured by Lahuh Nor, the ruler of Iximché, and came under that city's rule. Around 1541 the village was moved to its present site and named Tecpan Atitlán. In 1547, the Spanish friars arrived and baptized the population. To celebrate, they renamed the city Nuestra Senora de la Asuncion de Sololá (Our Lady of the Assumption of Sololá). Only Sololá stuck.

HISTORY

This is one of the most traditional cities in the area with the town divided into the same clans that existed before the conquest. Their native garb is quite colorful. The women wear skirts and blouses made of red striped cloth and the men wear flamboyant cowboy shirts with embroidered trousers. A highly stylized bat, the symbol of Maya royal house of Xahil, is worn on the back of their shiny jackets. The Xahil were rulers of the Cakchiquel at the time of the conquest.

GETTING HERE

Sololá is extremely easy to reach because it is on the same road as Panajachel and all buses going there must pass through the town. The road to Sololá/Panajachel starts a few miles west of the traffic hub Los Encuentros on the Pan-American Highway. Buses depart from Guatemala City and Antigua every half-hour; shuttles also bring you to Sololá.

ATTRACTIONS

Vendor, Sololá market

The best day to come to Sololá is Friday, when the **market** is in full swing. Hundreds of people come down from the highlands dressed in their finery to buy and sell. This is a more authentic market than the one in Panajachel and it's not as crowded as Chichicastenango's market. But the selection here is limited, since space is dedicated to selling practical things needed by the locals. The market takes place along the cathedral and central plaza, which was renovated in 2001 (locals are quite proud of the results). On non-market days, this town is pretty sleepy and the central square is almost deserted. But it makes for a pleasant visit away from the bustle of Panajachel.

Sunday is also a big day in Sololá, when the elders of the religious brotherhoods, known as *confradías*, have a **procession** through the streets to the cathedral. Although this is a solemn and dignified affair, it's certainly worth seeing.

> **NOTE:** Keep your camera tucked away. Picture-taking is not appreciated during the ceremony.

Another extremely picturesque place is the **cemetery**, just off the highway down to Lake Atitlán. It has the best view of the lake. The graves here have been painted bright colors and are decorated with an assortment of angels, flowers and plaques. Opulent family crypts are also the norm and some mausoleums are small masterpieces. Naturally, this is a very tranquil place and the only other people you will run into are those visiting their family or checking out their own plot.

WHERE TO STAY & EAT

HOTEL PRICE CHART

Prices are per person

$	under US $25
$$	US $26-50
$$$	US $51-85
$$$$	US $86-125
$$$$$	over US $125

The few hotels and restaurants are very basic. No credit cards are accepted. If you're looking for cheap food, head to one of the *comedores* around the central plaza. They serve tortillas, rice, beans and chicken.

Hotel y Restaurant Belén, *10a Calle 4-36, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-762-3105, 8 rooms, $.* This hotel is a block uphill from the central plaza and has a small, pleasant courtyard. Rooms have one double bed, overhead fan and private bathrooms. Hot water is sometimes available.

Posada Café Vista Hermosa Solala, *Calzada Venancio Barrios 0-85, Zona 2, ☎ 502/7-762-3576, 4 rooms, $.* This small guesthouse is attached to a residence. Rooms are tiny and clean, with one double bed and a private bath with hot water. It offers some nice views of the central plaza and surrounding streets, but not many of the lake. The restaurant serves daily specials that include chicken, soup, beef and sometimes fresh fish. Parking.

PANAJACHEL

Once upon a time Panajachel was a little village settled by the Cakchiquel Indians after the Spanish chased them away from Iximché. Like other fishing villages, it led a quiet life until one day some flower children arrived from the States. They fell in love with place and called it paradise. They told their friends, and their friends told their friends. Soon, Panajachel was famous. The flower children opened small restaurants and hotels and woke up one day to find that Panajachel was now a major tourist attraction. Then it was time for private lakeside villas and exclusive hotels to be built. Once the new-age healers and spiritual groups conducting energy workshops settled in, the transition was complete. Panajachel had become **Gringotenango** (Place of the Foreigners).

You can still find Cakchiquel and Tz'utuhil Maya here, but they are difficult to meet since most are busy making a living and have little time for tourists.

> **TIP:** Consider taking a language course or participating in one of the community projects to experience daily life here.

The worst things in Panajachel are the crowds and the street vendors, who are very aggressive and will test your patience. But keep in mind that development has created a have/have-not situation, with most of the Maya being the have-nots. At times, resentment runs high. Robberies are on the increase, so protect your valuables. When the hassles become too much, head down to the serene lake. It will remind you of the real reason people are drawn to Gringotenango.

With no ruins and little cultural life, most of the activities in Panajachel are centered around shopping or outdoor activities. Terrific hiking and biking trails lead to nearby villages. There are also horseback riding tours and a variety of watersports, such as kayaking, sailing and scuba diving.

GETTING HERE

Panajachel, or Pana as the locals refer to it, is very easy to reach. Numerous shuttle services in every major city are eager to whisk you off to the lake. Public buses leave several times a day from Guatemala City and other locations. The shuttle services are even more convenient – they take half the time, but are more expensive (US $7-12 per person, one way). The following companies offer regular service from Antigua or Guatemala City.

SHUTTLE COMPANIES

Adrenalina Tours, Portal Posada Asjemenou, ☎ 502/7-832-1108, www.adrenalinatours.com

Transportes Turisticos Atitlán Tours, 6a Av Sur #8, ☎ 502/7-832-3371, 7-832-0644, www.atitrans.com

Monarca Travel & Shuttle Service, Calzada Santa Lucía Norte #7, ☎ 502/7-832-1939, fax 502/7-832-0082, www.angelfire.com/mt/monarcastravel/shuttles.html

Sin Fronteras, Av Norte #15a, ☎ 502/7-832-1017, www.sinfront.com

Turansa, 9a Calle exit to Ciudad Vieja (inside Hotel Villas Antigua), ☎ 502/7-832-2928, fax 502/7-832-4692, www.turansa.com

Adventure Travel Center Viareal, S.A. 5a Av Norte #25B, ☎/fax 502/7-832-0162, www.adventuretravelguatemala.com

GETTING AROUND

Everything is within walking distance in Panajachel, so you won't need to take taxis. The main **bus** stop is at the corner of Calle Santander and Calle Real, across from Banco Mercantil.

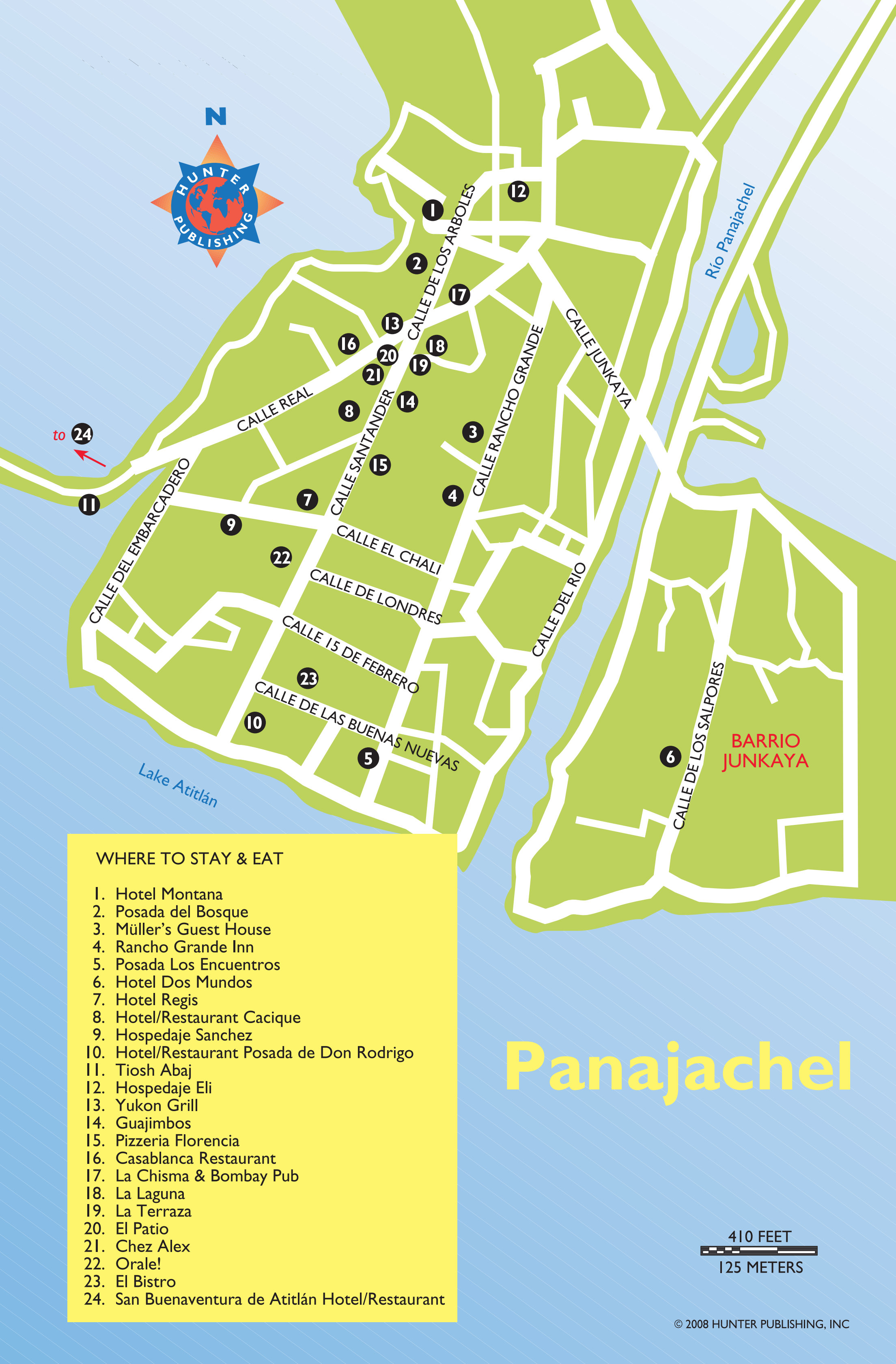
Public **ferries** offer rides to nearby villages. The boat to San Pedro leaves from the end of Calle Embarcadero, west of the main street, Calle Santander. All other boats leave from Calle del Balneario at the end of Calle Santander. Always check for the departure times at the main kiosk on the dock. The average ride on the ferry boat is Q10. You can buy a round-trip ticket for Q20, but this really isn't convenient because it means you must return on the same boat that you came on. Murphy's Law dictates that another boat will be returning when you want to head back. Also, some local boatmen will let you onto the boat knowing you have the wrong ticket. Once you are halfway across the lake, they tell you that you must buy another ticket since you are on the wrong boat. Just refuse. They won't push it.

Most **boats** returning to Panajachel from the other villages leave at 3 pm. For this reason, most people decide to stay overnight in one of the village hotels. If you do want to go back to Pana and have missed your ferry, you can hire a private boat for Q200 to take you back across the lake. You can also take the public bus from any of the villages back to Pana, although this is a long way back and some villages don't have buses.

> **WARNING:** Be wary of the *lancheros* (boatmen), who will approach you trying to sell rides. They will outright lie to you and tell you certain ferries are no longer running, running late or leaving at an inconvenient time. This is just a ploy to sell you a ticket on their boat for 150% more than the public ferry.

SPANISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Panajachel has several Spanish schools offering full-time courses at reasonable prices. Courses usually are a week long, with four to five hours of one-on-one teaching. For complete immersion you should consider living with a local family. It's a win-win situation – you will learn the language much more quickly and a local family is provided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CALLE DE LOS ARBOLES
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CALLE SANTANDER
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CALLE JUNKAYA
CALLE DEL EMBARCADERO
CALLE EL CHALI
CALLE DE LONDRES
CALLE 15 DE FEBRERO
CALLE DE LAS BUENAS NUEVAS
CALLE DEL RIO
CALLE DE LOS SALPORES
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410 FEET
125 METERS

Panajachel

WHERE TO STAY & EAT

1. Hotel Montana
2. Posada del Bosque
3. Müller's Guest House
4. Rancho Grande Inn
5. Posada Los Encuentros
6. Hotel Dos Mundos
7. Hotel Regis
8. Hotel/Restaurant Cacique
9. Hospedaje Sanchez
10. Hotel/Restaurant Posada de Don Rodrigo
11. Tiosh Abaj
12. Hospedaje Eli
13. Yukon Grill
14. Guajimbos
15. Pizzeria Florencia
16. Casablanca Restaurant
17. La Chisma & Bombay Pub
18. La Laguna
19. La Terraza
20. El Patio
21. Chez Alex
22. Orale!
23. El Bistro
24. San Buenaventura de Atitlán Hotel/Restaurant

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with some income. Prices for the school start at US $65 for classes only and US $120 for classes plus room and board for one week.

The most established schools in Panajachel are:

Jabel Tinamit, Calle Santander, Callejon el Capulin, ☎ 502/5-525-1282, www.jabeltinamit.com.

Pana Atitlán Language School, Av de los Arboles, Comedor San Francisco, ☎ 502/7-762-1196. This school will also send teachers out to the smaller villages for you to study there.

Escuela de Espanol, Av Santander, Calle 14 de Febrero, ☎ 502/7-762-3627, fax 502/7-762-0092.

ADVENTURES ON FOOT

Reserva Natural Atitlán (Atitlán Nature Reserve, www.atitlan.com/resnat.htm), one mile (two km) west of Panajachel, on the main highway, next to Hotel Atitlán, ☎ 502/7-762-2656. This is probably the simplest tour to organize in the Panajachel area. The reserve is within walking distance of town, or you can opt to take a free ride on the reserve's catamaran which leaves from the dock at the end of Calle Embarcadero, west of Calle Santander.

The reserve has a nature trail that leads across a suspended bridge over a small river canyon and continues to a small waterfall. Along the trail are spider monkey and coatimundi enclosures, and past the waterfall is a butterfly preserve and herb garden. The visitor center has an observation deck and a private beach where you can swim. This makes a lovely and relaxing day-trip for the whole family. Open daily from 8 am until 5 pm. US $7 for adults, $3.50 for students and children.

Lake Atitlán at sunset

The simplest and cheapest way to tour the area is to stroll along the road that makes its way around **Lake Atitlán**. The walk east from Panajachel to Santa Catarina takes about one hour and continues on to San Antonio, another 45 minutes away. With the lake and volcanoes to admire, the route is very picturesque. Sunset is particularly spectacular, but you shouldn't be too far from your hotel at this time as it gets dark quickly after the sun dips below the horizon. There are several spots to swim, but be aware that winds pick up in the afternoon, making the water choppy. The lake also gets deep very quickly. If you are tired and don't want to walk back, catch a boat back to Panajachel.

Santa Cruz to San Marcos Hike. This full-day excursion starts with a ferry ride across to Santa Cruz. You then take the trail that connects that village with Jaibalito, Tzununa and San Marcos. You return from San Marcos to Panajachel by boat. The trail is moderately difficult, with some climbing and slopes along the lake. Price is US $36 per person and includes a packed lunch, drinking water and the boat ride.

Full Lake Trek. Footpaths meander around the lake and there a number of tours that take in nearby villages and other stops along the way. You have the option of trekking or biking. Hunab Kú Travel Agency, Calle Santander, ☎ 502/7-762-1626, www.hunabkutours.com, offers a variety of tours, including a mountain bike tour. They also rent bikes by the hour or day.

HIKING OUTFITTERS

Richard Morgan, **Adventures in Education**, Posada Los Encuentros, Calle Santander, ☎ 502/7-762-2326, fax 502/7-762-1309, www.losencuentros.com.

You can also create your own route and itinerary with **Old Town Outfitters**, 6a Calle Poniente #7, ☎ 502/7-832-4243, www.adventureguatemala.com.

ADVENTURES ON WHEELS

Touring **Lake Atitlán** by bike is a pleasant way to visit. The road is not too hilly and the ride is relatively easy (although the return trip seems to be harder!). Depending on your level of fitness, the ride can take between four and six hours. Be sure to bring a hat and lots of water. If you don't feel like biking back, you can put your bicycle on one of the boats returning to Panajachel or try to get a ride on one of the small mini-vans that go from village to village (you may have to pay extra to put your bike on top).

BICYCLE RENTALS & OUTFITTERS

A number of places rent bicycles in Panajachel. Most of the shops are located along Calle Santander. Prices start at US $4 per day, per bike.

Moto Services, Calle Real, ☎ 502/7-762-2089.

Pana Rent, Calle de Los Arboles, no phone.

Panajachel Tourist Services, 3a Av 1-30, Zona 2, ☎ 502/7-762-2333.

TIP: Inspect your bike before you head out. Some places offer some real clunkers that probably shouldn't be on the road.

Old Town Outfitters, 6a Calle Poniente #7, Antigua, ☎ 502/7-832-4243, www.adventureguatemala.com, offers a wonderful combination bike and kayak tour. Their "Paddle and Pedal" starts off with a three-hour bike ride around the lake along a panoramic cliffside trail that leads down to the lake, where the are kayaks waiting. You kayak across the lake to their "secret" swim hole for some cliff diving and a visit to a nearby hotel. You can add a third day to the trip and try rock climbing, rappelling or hiking up San Pedro Volcano. Prices include all your gear, food, accommodation, guides and equipment. US $175 per person for two-day tour, US $250 for three-day tour per person, two person minimum.

ADVENTURES ON WATER

To find a boat offering tours of the lake, head down to the main dock at the foot of Calle Embarcadero. These ferries serve villages on the north side of the lake. A second pier at Rancho Grande at Calle Balneraio, serves Santiago Atitlán. You'll have to barter with the boat captains to get the price down to a reasonable Q70 per person for at least three hours. Prices will depend on how many people are in your group – the bigger the group, the smaller the fee per person. Unofficial rates start at about Q10 for short trips. If negotiating with the boatmen proves to be too much, there are several agencies that can arrange lake tours. **Servicios Turistico Atitlán**, Calle Santander near Calle 15 de Febrero, ☎ 502/7-762-2075, fax 502/762-2246, runs a trip that includes visits to San Pedro, Santiago and San Antonio Palopo. You stop in each village for one hour. Price includes transportation to the public dock, boat tickets, guide, and a box lunch. Departs at 8:30 am or 9:30 am and returns at 4 pm.

> **NOTE:** If you prefer independent travel, forego the lunch and guide and simply buy a boat ticket.

ATI Divers offer **scuba diving** as well as PADI training courses. Although they have an office in Panajachel on Calle Santander, the actual school is in Santa Cruz at the La Iguana Perdida hotel. See that listing, page 166, for more information.

Maya Guate, next to Av Santander, ☎/fax 502/7-762-0694, www.mayanguate.com, offers several kayaking tours around the lake or the chance to rent kayaks by the hour.

VOLCANO ADVENTURES

SAN PEDRO VOLCANO

Volcán San Pedro is on the south side of the lake and rises to 9,908 feet (3,020 meters). The base of the volcano is covered by coffee plantations that eventually give way to pine and deciduous forests. The trees here are tall and wide, so you don't have a view of the lake or the neighboring volcanoes until you reach the top. It takes three or four hours to climb along the trail as it passes through corn and coffee fields. It becomes steeper and more arduous the closer you get to the summit.

If you are not taking an organized tour, hire a local guide. Finding one is easy enough – in fact, when you step off the boat in the village of San Pedro La Laguna, you will be approached by a number of people. If you don't make arrangements there, ask at Nick's Restaurant in town. The going rate is Q100; make the price clear before heading out. Bring plenty of water and snacks for both you and your guide, and be sure you have a sweater or jacket for the cooler air once you reach the summit. See the San Pedro section, below, for a list of hotels in this area.

> **WARNING:** Don't do this trek alone – it's very easy to get lost on the trails and you may be stranded for several days.

TOURS OF SAN PEDRO VOLCANO

SAN PEDRO VOLCANO & THREE VILLAGE TOUR: This two-day hike starts in Panajachel and travels by boat to Santa Cruz for a half-day hike to San Marcos. After lunch in San Marcos, the tour continues to San Pedro de la Laguna for an overnight stay. In the morning, get your boots on for the climb to summit of San Pedro. This is a moderate-to-difficult hike. Contact **Richard Morgan**, Adventures in Education Inc, at Posada Los Encuentros, Callejon Chotzar 0-41, B, Jucanya, ☎ 502/7-762-1603, fax 502/7-762-1309, www.losencuentros.com.

HORSEBACK TOUR: This two-day/one-night tour starts in Guatemala City. The first day includes a sailing tour of the lake, a visit to the Atitlán Nature Reserve & Butterfly Farm and shopping for handicrafts. You stay overnight in Panajachel. The next day you cross the lake to San Pedro la Laguna, where your horses are waiting. Lunch is on the trail in a wood cabin. Along the way, the guide will stop for birding and to point out the local flora and fauna. The price of $175 per person includes all transportation, meals, one night's accommodation, guides and horses. Contact **Maya Expeditions**, 15 Calle 1-91, Zona 10, local 104. Guatemala City, ☎ 502/2-363-4955, fax 502/2-337-4660, www.mayaexpeditions.com, for more information and prices.

Servicios Turístico Atitlán, Calle Santander near Calle 15 Febrero, ☎ 502/7-762-2075, fax 502/7-762-2246, offers a day-trip to the volcano. Tickets are US $35 and include pickup at your hotel, transportation to and from San Pedro, breakfast, guide and box lunch. You can also choose to join only the boat ride and hire a guide for US $25 per person.

SHOPPING

SE ALQUILA
TELEFONO

Corner shop, Panajachel

Panajachel has one of the largest outdoor handicraft markets in Guatemala. Dozens of stalls sell a myriad different crafts such as beaded purses, necklaces, textiles, ceramics, leather goods and clothing. Street vendors also wander this area. The market, Comericales de Artesanías Tipicas Tinamit Maya, stretches the full length of Calle Santander down to the public docks.

There are lots of bargains to be found here, but be sure to barter. Prices are automatically doubled or even tripled because the vendors expect you to barter. Start by offering half of what you are willing to pay and move up from there. Halfway through the negotiations, pretend to become disgusted with the prices being offered and walk away. The vendor will call you back and negotiations can start again. Eventually, you will settle on a price (usually half of what is being asked) and everyone leaves happy. (Bartering is not done in the stores.)

DEALING WITH STREET VENDORS

You will be approached by many street vendors. At first, buying from them may be fun. Some of the children are pretty cute. But after a few days of constant badgering and having things shoved under your nose while you are trying to eat, the charm of vendors can wear thin. Most are from the school of nag-'em-til-they-buy-something. You will hear over and over: *Una para ti, bueno color para ti, por favor, una, una para ti* (here is one for you, it's a good color for you, one, please, just one, for you). They will also give you a story about needing to sell something in order to buy tortillas. Keep in mind that most of the street vendors in Panajachel are doing okay (the poorer vendors work in the smaller villages). The more aggressive ones will drape their goods around your shoulders and then refuse to take their sample back and demand you pay for what you have taken. Ignore them and hand back their goods.

Some tourists think they will buy just one thing to show they have already spent their money. This doesn't work and the vendors will suggest you need another *por una amiga* (for a friend). Unless you want to end up owning a small truckload of bracelets or be pestered to the point of insanity, you must learn how to deal with them. The best – albeit the rudest way – is not to respond to them. Most take a *no, gracias* to mean they can wear you down. But if you don't respond at all they will eventually leave. This is difficult to do without feeling like a heartless human being. (Canadians may find this strategy impossible.)

WHERE TO STAY

There is a vast assortment of hotels in Panajachel, ranging from budget digs to very exclusive resorts. While seemingly a bargain, many of the budget options are nasty, overpriced and unsafe. The mid-range hotels are much safer. Whatever your budget, check your room before paying.

HOTEL PRICE CHART

Prices are per person

$	under US $25
$$	US $26-50
$$$	US $51-85
$$$$	US $86-125
$$$$$	over US $125

> **TIP:** Smaller hotels use a padlock system for securing doors. There is a latch and bolt attached to the door and frame that you put a lock through. Usually this works quite well, unless the screws holding the bolt are loose and the whole lock can be easily removed. Robbers have the system down and can clean you out in 15 minutes. Check the security of your hotel. Most mid-range hotels have on-site security and safes for guests to lock up valuables.

Hotel Atitlán, *Finca San Buenaventura, one mile (two km) west of Panajachel, on the lake, ☎ 502/2-360-8405, fax 502/2-334-0640, www.hotelatitlan.com, 64 rooms, $$$$.* This luxury hotel in a quiet cove is the best in Panajachel. It has a Spanish hacienda building style and décor, with rooms centered around a pool and garden. Rooms are richly appointed, with two wrought-iron queen-size beds, colorful linens, tile floors, antique wooden furniture, private bathrooms and a balcony or patio with a lake view. The grounds are quite spectacular and feature sculpted trees and bushes accented by flowers and shrubs. On the premises are a restaurant, tennis courts, pool, bar and shop. The long, lovely beach borders the Atitlán Nature Reserve. Even if you are not staying here, stop by the restaurant for a drink or meal and watch the sunset over the lake (see *Where to Eat*, below, for complete restaurant review).

Hotel Posada de Don Rodrigo, *Calle Santander and Calle de las Buenas Nuevas, ☎ 502/7-762-2322, 30 rooms, $$$.* This small luxury hotel has easy access to the lake. The rooms are large and tastefully decorated with local textiles, dark wood furniture and lovely rugs. The showers are divine (plenty of water pressure and hot water). Out back, the grounds have hammocks and chairs, while in front is the lakeside restaurant with a pool and water slide. There is also a sauna and a squash court.

Hotel Cacique Inn, *Calle del Embarcadero, ☎ 502/7-762-1205, 34 rooms, $$$.* This hotel is actually several buildings tucked away from the main street. It doesn't have a lake view, but it does have a lovely private garden and swimming pool surrounded by a wall. The rooms are well decorated, with wooden furniture and tile floors, but the best features are the fireplaces and doors that open onto the garden. The restaurant is excellent (see page 160).

© Hotel Dos Mundos

Hotel Dos Mundos, *Calle Santander 4-72, ☎ 502/7-762-2078, fax 502/7-762-0127, www.hoteldosmundos.com, 21 rooms, $$-$$$.* Dos Mundos refers to the two worlds brought together in this hotel. The owner has combined Guatemalan and Italian décor to create a classy hotel at a reasonable price. The palapa-roofed bungalows are casually styled with wooden furniture and splashes of color. Most open onto the immaculate pool and tropical gardens that lead up to the fantastic restaurant, La Tanerna, which serves the best Italian food in the area.

Hotel Regis, *Calle Santander, ☎ 502/7-762-1149, fax 502/7-762-1152, 20 bungalows, $$-$$$.* Located in the heart of the city, this is a slightly dumpy hotel that somehow manages to be charming. Bungalows are spread out around lovely gardens with huge trees. There are two thermal hot springs and a hot tub for guest use. The room décor is vaguely colonial – mostly it's just generic. Some of the bungalows have fireplaces and can sleep up to six, making them a real bargain. The one drawback is the whopping 10% fee on all credit cards.

Rancho Grande Inn, *Calle Rancho Grande, ☎ 502/7-762-1554, fax 502/7-762-2247, www.ranchograndeinn.com, 11 bungalows, $$.* This was one of the first hotels in Panajachel, opened in 1940 by a German woman who became famous for her hospitality. Her legacy has continued with Marlita Hannstein, who now operates this country inn combining European and Guatemalan styles. Each bungalow has been decorated individually with woven rugs and bedspreads. All have wonderfully comfortable king-size beds, wood ceilings, white stucco walls and tile floors. Private porches look out onto well-tended flower gardens and a hearty family-style breakfast is included in your room rate. It's one of the best deals in town and fills up quickly. Reservations are a must.

Posada Los Encuentros, *Callejon Chotzar 0-41B, Jucanya, ☎ 502/7-762-2093, fax 502/7-762-1309, www.losencuentros.com, 5 rooms, $$.* This hotel bills itself as a lodge, but it is more like a private home. It's open, airy and gracefully decorated with Guatemalan art, sculpture, throw rugs, animal masks and ceramic tiles. The living room, located next to a small gym, is filled with cozy sofas and a fireplace. Rooms are simple and elegant, with a large king-size bed, wooden furniture and lovely wall art. The food is healthy and delicious, though the restaurant is for guests only. The owners offer a number of interesting workshops in yoga, meditation and nutrition, as well as tours in the area.

Tiosh Abaj, *Canton Tzanjuyú, ☎ 502/7-721-7165, 30 rooms, $$.* You can't beat the location of this hotel, tucked away on an eastern corner of the lake. Rooms have wonderful balconies and windows that open to panoramic views of the lake. The hotel has just been renovated so everything is fresh and clean. A lovely flower garden is the perfect spot to watch the sunset.

Panajachel's cathedral

Hotel Montaña, *Callejon Don Tino, near the cathedral, ☎/fax 502/7-762-0326, 15 rooms, $.* This modest hotel is in the older neighborhood of town that doesn't have much traffic or noise. It offers lovely views of the mountains. The rooms are on the small side, but are clean with good beds, lots of hot water and cable TV. Hotel Montaña is within walking distance of all the restaurants and shops. No credit cards.

Müller's Guest House, *Calle Rancho Grande 1-82, ☎ 502/7-762-2442. 3 rooms, 1 bungalow, $$.* This is another guest house opened by a European and it closely resembles a B&B. All rooms open onto a sweet flowering garden. Rooms are decorated in pastel colors with blond furniture and floors. Breakfasts are served in a cozy nook and there are snacks of wine and cheese in the afternoon. Everyone enjoys this tranquil guest-house and it fills up quickly. Make sure you have a reservation.

Hospedaje Eli, *Callejón del Pozo, ☎ 502/7-762-0148, 10 rooms, $.* This is a very basic, family-run hotel. It's clean and has a lovely garden in a quiet location.

Posada de Bosque, *Callejon las Armonias, ☎ 502/7-762-0245, 6 rooms, $.* This is probably the cheapest hotel in town. It's a pleasant place with a large garden and basic rooms with private baths and hot water. Parking is available. No credit cards.

Hospedaje Sanchez, *Calle Chali, ☎ 502/7-762-2224, 6 rooms, $.* A family-run hotel with a nice atmosphere. Rooms are basic, with one double bed and private baths with hot showers. There is a nice roof terrace where you can enjoy a view of the city. No credit cards.

WHERE TO EAT

Hotel Atitlán Restaurant, *Finca San Buena- ventura, one mile (two km) west of Panajachel, on the lake, ☎ 502/2-360-8405, fax 502/2-334-0640, www.hotelatitlan.com.* The food here is reliably good, but the real draw is the phenomenal ambience and first-class service. The restaurant overlooks the lake and offers views of the fantastic sunsets. Good dishes include roast chicken, porterhouse steak, Caesar salad and wonderful desserts. You have access to the pool and beach while at the restaurant. If you're not up for dinner, stop by for a cocktail as the sun goes down. US $12-25.

Cacique Inn Restaurant, *Calle del Embarcadero, ☎ 502/7-762-1205.* This quaint hotel restaurant serves delicious traditional dishes. Try the red pepper soup, chorizos (spicy sausage), *chiles rellenos* (stuffed peppers) or *pepian de pollo* (spicy chicken in pumpkin and sesame sauce). International dishes includes shrimp ceviche, *robálo* (fish) and fresh pasta. It's all terrific. US $12-20.

La Terrraza, *end of Calle Santander above the IGUAT office, ☎ 502/7-761-0041.* This unassuming restaurant is one of the best in the Lake Atitlán area. It has a nicely decorated open-air terrace and an eclectic menu featuring European and Asian cuisine. Try the Niçoise salad or spring rolls for starters, followed by steak tartare or Veracruzana fish (served in a tomato, olive and onion sauce). The menu changes frequently to make use of the freshest ingredients. Ask about the wonderful daily specials. US $8-15.

Snack time

Hotel Posada de Don Rodrigo Restaurant, *Calle Santander and Calle de las Buenas Nuevas, ☎ 502/7-762-2326, fax 502/7-331-6838.* The food is very good, especially the handmade tortillas, fish dishes and fresh pastas. But the best thing about this restaurant is the romantic setting. Terrace tables overlook a courtyard with a beautiful tiled fountain and lovely garden that are both lighted at night. Live marimba music completes the experience. US $12-20.

Al Chisme, *Av de los Arboles, no 25, no phone.* The dining room has a tiled fountain, a fireplace and a terrace with a lighted garden. Just off the terrace, a woman prepares tortillas on a grill, and marimba music in the courtyard enlivens every meal. The menu has Guatemalan favorites, a few continental choices and pasta. No credit cards.

Casablanca, *Calle Prinsipal 0-93, ☎ 502/7-762-1015.* This is one terrific little restaurant. It has a warm décor with white walls that are trimmed with wood and decorated with bright Guatemalan artwork. The windows open up onto the street so you can watch people go by. Specialties are fish and seafood dishes. Try the grilled lake fish, served in a bed of steamed rice. Pasta options are quite good, too. US $6-$12.

El Bistro, *end of Calle Santander, no phone.* A cozy restaurant suitable for a romantic dinner either inside by candlelight or outside with the garden lights. The menu is Italian – and what food it is! The bruschetta is incredible, as are the fresh pastas (try the fettuccine), antipasto and green salads. I especially liked the steak au poivre (pepper steak). El Bistro is a bit hidden. Look for the iron gate beside a low wall just where the road hits the lake. US $8-15.

El Patio, *halfway down Calle Santander, ☎ 502/7-762-2041.* The décor is rather non-specific, but this restaurant has an incredible menu. Enjoy such classics as Virginia baked ham, goulash, roast beef, filet mignon and chicken à la king. It also serves a terrific breakfast with pancakes, egg dishes and great coffee. Their Sunday barbecue is popular with the expatriate crowd. US $6-10.

Chez Alex, *Calle Santander at Calle Londres*, ☎ *502/7-762-0172, fax 502/7-762-0171.* This restaurant serves consistently good food. It's got simple elegant wood décor with soft lighting and white linen tablecloths topped with fine china. The food is a mixture of European styles, a bit of German mixed with French and Italian. The wienerschnitzel is very good, as are the fettuccine and steak dishes (their meat is imported from Australia). The good food is complemented by an excellent wine list and live music on weekends. $10-12.

La Laguna, *Calle Santander at Av de los Arboles,* ☎ *502/7-762-1231.* This is a romantic restaurant, a former colonial home converted into small rooms for dining. There is soft music, candles and local artwork that adds to the general mellow ambience. Their specialty is traditional Guatemalan dishes. Do try the *pepian de pollo* (spicy chicken in pumpkin sauce) or the grilled black bass straight from the lake. Their ceviche and guacamole are excellent. There is a decent wine list. Be sure to check the daily specials, which usually represent an excellent deal. US $6-12.

Bombay, *Calle de kis Arboles,* ☎ *502/7-762-0611.* Despite the name, this restaurant does not serve Indian food. It does, however, have wonderful Middle Eastern dishes such as falafel and pita bread sandwiches. There are also vegetarian specials and fresh fruit drinks. US $2-6. No credit cards.

Yukon Grill, *Calle Principal.* Come here for the best burger in Guatemala, served with crisp fries. Definitely a find. US $3-10 per person.

Guajimbo's, *Plaza los Patios, Calle Santander.* This Uruguay-style grill house offers delicious steaks and chicken grilled to perfection. Main dishes come with vegetables, salad, garlic bread and either rice or potatoes. There are also vegetarian dishes. You won't leave hungry. US $3-7 per person.

Pizzeria Florencia, *Calle Santander,* ☎ *502/7-762-1055.* Freshly prepared pizza with a variety of toppings accompany Argentinean empañadas as well as delicious hamburgers and cheeseburgers. Coffee and breakfast are offered in the morning. Plus, they'll deliver to your hotel.

¡Orale!, *Calle Santander 4-29, Zona 2,* ☎ *502/7-762-0017.* This is the home of the US $2 breakfast as well as cheap and filling tacos. More expensive dishes are also offered – such as steak and grilled meat – but the best meals remain the breakfasts. It's got good beer prices. US $1-6.

VILLAGES OF LAKE ATITLÁN

The villages around Lake Atitlán are populated with a variety of Maya tribes who have kept their colorful clothing and traditional way of life. Each village has something different to offer, and each has accommodations so overnight stays are relatively easy. These are the places where you come to enjoy markets, natural wonders and Maya culture. Although some of the communities can be reached by road, the simplest and most comfortable way to visit is by boat from Panajachel.

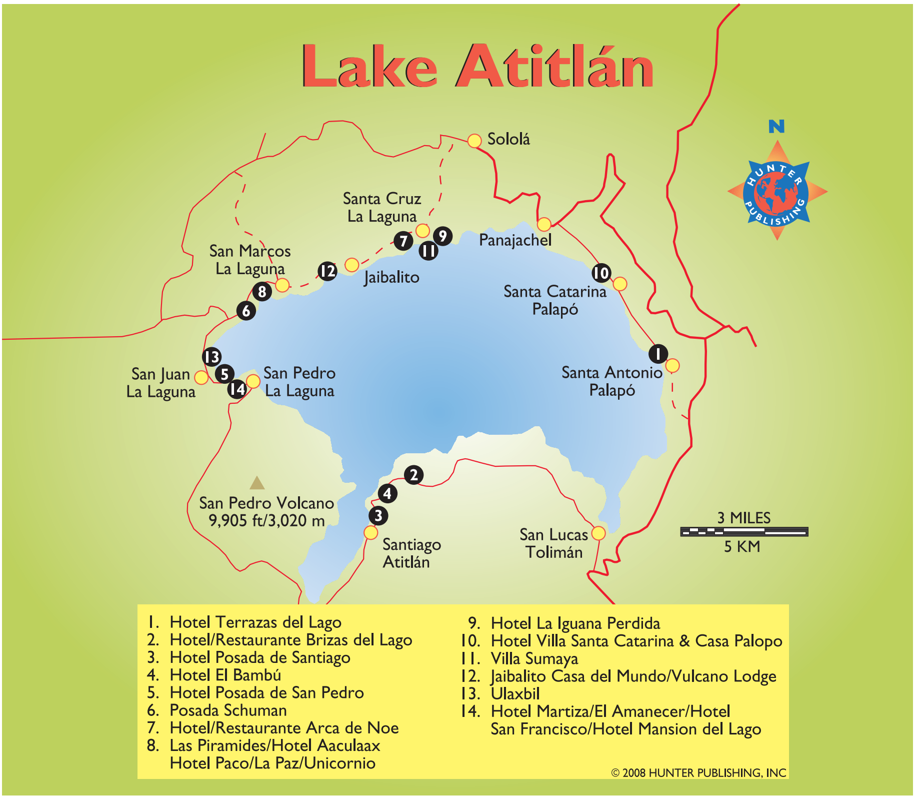
Eastern Lake Atitlán

SANTA CATARINA PALOPÓ

This small village is only 13 miles (four km) east of Panajachel. It used to be a fishing village until the introduction of black bass, which promptly ate all the other fish. Today, residents support themselves by growing coffee and selling their distinctive weaving with its bold zigzags. It's a charming place, with narrow cobblestone streets and adobe houses. Sadly, it's difficult to enjoy the shoreline since it has been filled with exclusive private villas and posh hotels. Other than enjoying the beautiful views, there is not much to do here.

WHERE TO STAY

Casa Palopó, *Km 6.8, ☎ 502/5-773-7777, www.casapalopo.com, 7 rooms, $$$$$.* This exclusive and gorgeous private villa is on the shores of Lake Atitlán. Rooms are done up with cushy king-size beds, wooden floors, exposed ceilings and walls painted lovely shades of blue to match the beautiful linens. All rooms open up onto a small terrace that overlooks the lake and volcanoes. The sitting areas have fireplaces, wooden floors, throw rugs, soft upholstered chairs and Maya art. A full breakfast, served on the terrace overlooking the lake, is included in your room rate. There is an elegant pool and cute dining room. The hotel offers a shuttle service, helicopter pick-up, a business center and tours to anywhere in Gua-


Lake Atitlán
N
HUNTER PUBLISHING
Sololá
Santa Cruz La Laguna
San Marcos La Laguna
Panajachel
Jaibalito
Santa Catarina Palapó
San Juan La Laguna
San Pedro La Laguna
Santa Antonio Palapó
San Pedro Volcano 9,905 ft/3,020 m
Santiago Atitlán
San Lucas Tolimán
3 MILES
5 KM
1. Hotel Terrazas del Lago
2. Hotel/Restaurante Brizas del Lago
3. Hotel Posada de Santiago
4. Hotel El Bambú
5. Hotel Posada de San Pedro
6. Posada Schuman
7. Hotel/Restaurante Arca de Noe
8. Las Piramides/Hotel Aaculaax Hotel Paco/La Paz/Unicornio
9. Hotel La Iguana Perdida
10. Hotel Villa Santa Catarina & Casa Palopo
11. Villa Sumaya
12. Jaibalito Casa del Mundo/Vulcano Lodge
13. Ulaxbil
14. Hotel Martiza/El Amanecer/Hotel San Francisco/Hotel Mansion del Lago
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temala. All this luxury just might give you a nosebleed. It's far too posh for children, who are not welcome.

Villa Santa Catarina, *8a Calle 1-75, Zona 10, ☎ 502/2-334-8136, 31 rooms, $$$.* This is an adobe-style two-story hotel with a lovely tile roof and yellow walls. The rooms are snug, with hardwood floors, exposed beams, pastel colors and Guatemalan bedspreads. Each has a private balcony with a lake view. There are also two nice lakeside pools (one for children) and a tennis court. The restaurant here serves excellent local dishes, including *pepian de pollo* (chicken in a spicy pumpkin sauce) and grilled fish.

SAN ANTONIO PALOPÓ

Another 3.1 miles (five km) past San Catarina is San Antonio Palopó, a traditional small village where most of the men and women dress in their characteristic purple clothing. The village is set on a cliff overlooking the lake. Irrigated terraces have been built and it's here that locals grow vegetables that they sell at various markets. There is little to do here but enjoy the quite pace of life, walk the trails around the village and just relax.

WHERE TO STAY

Terrazas del Lago, *Calle de la Playa, ☎ 502/7-762-0157 or 0037, www.hotelterrazasdellago.com, 12 rooms, $$.* This dear little hotel overlooks the town's public beach, which offers excellent swimming. The entire hotel, including the bedrooms, is decorated in floral-pattern tiles. Rooms are huge, with comfortable wooden tables, candles and other nice accents. Ask for a front room; they have a patio that overlooks the lake with the volcanoes in the background. The rooftop restaurant serves good simple meals. Breakfast is particularly pleasant here.

NOTE: You can take either a bus or boat from Panajachel to reach both Santa Catarina and San Antonio. Sometimes the bus is faster – it's also cheaper.

SAN LUCAS TOLIMÁN

Tolimán Volcano

This village on the far southeast corner of the lake is primarily a coffee-growing area with a *Ladino* population. Tolimán Volcano looms in the background.

The village's Friday market here is large and colorful, but it's not geared toward tourists and sells mostly produce and practical goods. The town church, Iglesia San Lucas in the central plaza, dates back to the 1600s and is worth visiting. As you walk through town, you will see traditional homes made from bamboo. Because this village is a transportation hub for the Pacific departments and Guatemala City, there is quite a lot of traffic.

WHERE TO STAY

Toliman Hotel, *Main Street, ☎ 502/7-722-0033, 22 rooms, $$.* Owners Eduardo and Yara Olivero have refurbished a former coffee bean ranch, transforming it into a very comfortable and tranquil hotel. They've kept the traditional Spanish architecture and the interior reflects the 17th-century style with various indigenous objects, furniture and ceramics. There are some fantastic views, since you are surrounded by beautiful foliage and forested hills. The restaurant serves delicious Guatemalan dishes. A perfect place to base yourself and explore the area.

Western Lake Atitlán

SANTA CRUZ LA LAGUNA

Cliffs, Santa Cruz La Laguna

Santa Cruz La Laguna is the nearest village to the west of Panajachel and one of the largest on the western shore. It sits on a cliff overlooking the lake and has some wonderful walking trails that lead alongside the lake to either Panajachel or San Marcos. Lake Atitlán's only scuba school is located here.

Lake Atitlán ATI dive school is located alongside Hotel Iguana Perdida. They offer a variety of courses, including open water certification (US $175) and PADI high-altitude diving. A two-tank dive costs US $45. They do have an office in Panajachel on Calle Santander, but you should book through the school in Santa Cruz. Plan to spend a night at the lake after your dive in order to pass the recommended 18 hours before moving to a higher altitude to avoid decompression sickness. Lake water is clearest from May until October. Contact the school at ☎ 502/7-762-2621, ati_divers@yahoo.com.

WHERE TO STAY

La Iguana Perdida, *main dock, ☎ 502/5-706-4117, www.laiguanaperdida.com, 3 dorm-style rooms with shared bath, 3 cabins with private bath. $.* This is a back-to-nature hotel with little in the way of electricity or hot water. The thatched bungalows come with kerosene lamps and dorm-style rooms that will remind you of summer camp. The restaurant serves excellent vegetarian food and there is a nice sauna on site. Meals are a communal affair.

Arca de Noe, *main dock, ☎ 502/5-306-4352, 10 rooms, 6 with private baths. $.* This is another rustic hotel powered by solar energy with a phenomenal view of the lake. Small bungalows have comfortable rooms furnished with local textiles. Delicious meals, served in the main house, include fresh vegetables and bread. It's a very congenial and tranquil atmosphere.

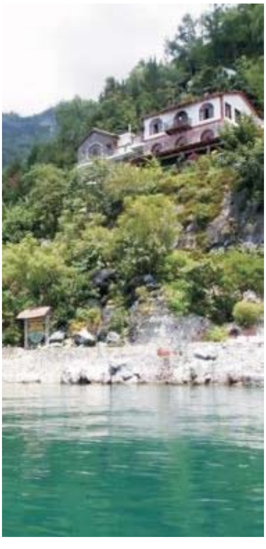
Villa Sumaya, *down from the main dock, ☎ 502/5-617-1209, www.villasumaya.com, 7 rooms, $$$.* This is a small, private villa offering yoga workshops and meditation retreats. Rooms are in palapa-roof bungalows with ceramic tile floors, wooden furniture and crisp linens all tied together in an adobe-brown and sienna color scheme. A long veranda has rocking chairs and hammocks where you can enjoy the view. There is also a hot tub, meditation corner and reading room. Meals are made with organic fruits, vegetables and meat, along with freshly baked bread. The hotel will pick you up from Panajachel.

JABALITO

This tiny village has no roads and is accessible only by boat. Ancient trails, some leading all the way to Sololá, criss-cross the area. This is the place to come for adventurous treks. You can catch a boat from Panajachel directly here, but a more scenic route is to get off at Santa Cruz and walk the cliff-side trail for 45 minutes to reach Jabalito. It's an astonishing hike, with views of the lake and volcanoes – worth the effort.

WHERE TO STAY

Casa del Mundo, *Jaibalito dock, ☎ 502/5-218-5332, www.lacasadelmundo.com, 8 rooms, 4 with baths, $$$.* Many promise but few deliver. This hotel, built on a sheer cliff, offers rooms with breathtaking views. The hotel is impeccably outfitted with red-tile floors and wood-beam ceilings. It is decorated with regional fabrics, fresh flowers and Maya art. The restaurant serves delicious meals of fresh fish and assorted Guatemalan specialties. Outside, a hot tub is nestled among the verdant gardens. Brave souls may want to try the nine-foot (15-meter) cliff jump into a pristine pool. Quieter types may prefer to rent one of the kayaks.



Casa del Mundo

Vulcano Lodge, *four minutes from Jabalito dock, ☎ 502/5-410-2237, www.vulcanolodge.com, 54 rooms, $$.* This tranquil hotel is set amid a coffee plantation just up from the lake. The gardens have fruit trees, flowering bushes, flowers, orchids and a variety of other plants. Rooms are small but can accommodate four people, with private patios, nice bathrooms and firm beds. The family suite has a view of the lake and the three surrounding volcanoes. All rooms have a private bath and hot water. Breakfast and lunch is à la carte and dinner is family style, served with home-produced coffee. The hotel can arrange for tours to the nearby volcanoes.

SAN MARCOS LA LAGUNA

San Marcos has become a gathering spot for the New Age element in Lake Atitlán, with plenty of Reiki and meditation courses. The village itself is tiny, with only a few houses set among fruit trees and coffee plantations and a small church built by the Franciscans in 1584. Party animals will be bored here since there are no bars. There isn't much to do here unless you are having your aura balanced or tarot cards read. The shore is quite rocky, so you will have to swim off the docks in town.

WHERE TO STAY

Las Piramides, *inland from dock, ☎ 502/5-205-7151, 7 pyramids, $.* Every building on this property is in the shape of a pyramid, including the guesthouses. But this is not really a hotel, but rather a study center, and you must register for one of the courses in order to stay here. Daily yoga is offered, and courses include a lunar meditation program that starts with the full moon and lasts four weeks. Scattered throughout the gardens are the pyramid guesthouses, all equipped with firm mattresses. The vegetarian restaurant offers a variety of drinks and dishes.

Posada Schumann, *lakeside, just past the main dock, ☎ 502/5-702-2216, www.posadaschumann.com, 4 rooms with shared bath, 3 private bungalows, $.* This a solar-powered hotel has a great lakeside location and lovely gardens. The bungalows are rustic and feature lovely stonework, wood panels and bright Guatemalan textiles. They are equipped with a kitchen and private bath. The restaurant serves simple, tasty meals. There is even a private dock for those arriving by boat. Ask your boatman to drop you off here.

Hotel Paco Real, *main dock, ☎ 502/5-918-7215, 2 bungalows, 3 rooms, $.* This is the first hotel you see as you step off the boat. It has very nice gardens surrounded by small bungalows that have been constructed using traditional methods, with wood, adobe and palms. Each one has a loft bed, porch and tile floors. There are some more simple rooms available, too, at a lower price. All have shared baths. The restaurant here serves wonderful French cuisine.

Hotel La Paz, *beside Hotel Paco, ☎ 502/5-702-9168, 3 bungalows, $.* Although the gardens are really incredible, the bungalows here are a bit crowded. Each one sleeps five people dormitory-style and everyone is quite chummy; if you are looking for privacy, choose another spot. Meals are vegetarian and use organic produce from the gardens. A traditional Maya sauna using heated stones is available for guest use.

Hotel Aaculaax, *lakeside, ☎ 502/5-287-0521, www.aaculaax.com, 2 suites $$$, 4 rooms, $$.* Lake Atitlán's first eco-hotel is a work of art. Built using only local recycled materials and clay, the hotel is chemical free and earthquake-proof, installed with compost toilets and a greywater system. Beautiful stained-glass windows have been made from recycled glass. The two suites and four rooms have hand-painted murals and private baths. This is one hotel not to be missed.

Unicorno Rooms, *main dock, no phone, 3 bungalows, $.* This is another communal hotel with three small palapa-roofed bungalows that share a bath. There is no hot water or electricity, but there is a sauna and a great garden. No credit cards.

SAN JUAN LA LAGUNA

This Maya community is set along a large bay with lovely beaches and, in the near distance, San Pedro Volcano. Most of its 3,500 inhabitants work on local coffee farms, but a number of them also produce *petates*, delicate mats woven from the reeds that grow along the banks of the bay. There is also a small community of painters producing naïve art. Not many tourists come here, which leads to a very relaxed atmosphere. You can hike the volcano or follow the path along the shore to neighboring San Pedro. One popular trail leads to the beautiful Las Cristilinas mountains. You should hire a guide for this trip (ask at the ferry docks). Fishing is also good in this area.

San Pedro is also home to the Maya god, Maximón. The town has a low-key shrine (as opposed to Santiago Atitlán, where it has become a major tourist attraction). If you want to pay your respects to Maximón without a lot of hoopla, then this is the place to visit. See page 176 for more details about Maximón.

WHERE TO STAY

Uxlabil EcoHotel, *six blocks from village at Barrio Xacal, ☎ 502/5-990-6016, www.uxlabil.com/atitlaning.htm, 10 rooms, $$.* Uxlabil is the Mayan word for breath and this hotel is the perfect place to stop and take a breather. It is set on two acres of land covered with coffee plantations and offers a sweeping view of the lake. The owners hired stone carvers from San Juan to construct the hotel and help keep this ancient art alive. The result is a distinctive hotel done in a colonial hacienda style. Rooms have stone walls and carved stone headboards. The restaurant, whose interior resembles a colonial church, is run by a local Maya family and the menu includes fresh fish and crab from the lake, along with other Maya dishes. A wonderful 147-foot (45-meter) deck is used by swimmers and anglers. The hotel will pick you up at Panajachel and arrange tours to the volcanoes. An additional US $16 per day will get you three meals and plenty of fresh coffee.

SAN PEDRO LA LAGUNA

San Pedro La Laguna

This is the naughty village on the lake. While other communities are meditating or communing with nature, San Pedro is growing pot and partying every night. It makes no bones about being the marijuana capital of Atitlán and you will be offered herb as soon as you step off the boat. It's about to usurp Panajachel as the "it"place on the lake. However, there is more to do here than just get high.

This quirky village isn't as polished as the other villages in the area. It has no official streets, just cobblestone paths that are sometimes strewn with garbage. Everything seems to cost US $2 and there is a disproportionate number of Evangelical churches. Added to the general milieu are the very eccentric foreigners who have settled here. Despite all these drawbacks, there is something pulling it all together and eventually San Pedro grows on you. So much so that some visitors never leave.

GETTING AROUND

With no streets, directions are given with reference to the two main docks. The south dock is for boats to Santiago Atitlán, while the north dock is for boats to Panajachel. Walk straight ahead from either dock, uphill, to the center of town or follow the paths to the right or left to the various hotels. It doesn't matter which way you go – the village is too small to get lost.

SPANISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION

There are two excellent Spanish schools in San Pedro. **Escuela de Español Casa Rosario**, the first school in town, has been operating for eight years. The owners, Vicente and Samuel Cumes, are considered the best teachers in the area. They offer 20 hours of instruction for just US $90, which includes a host family, but no meals. They encourage contact between the teachers and students and offer some interesting tours, including visits to nearby villages. You have the option of renting an apartment in the school building if you do not want to board with a family. The school doesn't have a phone, but it does have an excellent website, www.casarosario.com.

San Pedro Spanish School, *beside Solar Pools,* ☎ *502/7-715 4604, www.sanpedrospanishschool.org/school.html.* This well-organized school gets consistently good reviews from satisfied students. Courses are given under shelters in gardens with a view of the lake. Schedules are flexible and there are plenty of activities where you can practice your Spanish. You can decide to board with a family or just take the classes. It's a great way to meet non-gringo members of the community.

San Pedro Spanish School

WALKING TOURS

A number of terrific scenic trails lead from San Pedro to the neighboring communities of San Juan and San Pablo. There are some great spots for swimming along the way, particularly as you get close to San Juan. The whole hike takes about three hours. If you are feeling really ambitious, try the southern trail that leads to Santiago Atitlán, which takes about four hours. This, too, offers some great views of the lake.

Thermal Waters, ☎ 502/5-206-9658. An eccentric horticulturist/inventor built these individual solar-heated pools located between the two docks and facing the lake. A terrific organic restaurant on site serves vegetarian meals and there's also a sweat lodge. Reservations are recommended.

Although the San Pedro Volcano is in the backyard of San Pedro, few official tours run from the village; most of the tours leave from either Pana or Guatemala City (see the appropriate city chapter for a list of operators). Things are more casual here, and local guides take people up the volcano. The going rate is Q100 per person, and it gets lower the more people in your group. Your tour will start in the coffee plantations, ascending the forest trail and, eventually, the summit. Bring bug repellant, water, snacks and warm clothes (it's chilly at the top). Ask around town for locals to recommend reliable guides.

WARNING: Don't do this trek alone. It's very easy to get lost on the trails or run into other trouble if you are alone.

WHERE TO STAY

There are lots of budget hotels. In fact, San Pedro offers *only* budget hotels. None accept credit cards. Cleanliness and comfort vary, although most places are decent.

Hotel Valle Azul

Hotel Valle Azul, *15 rooms, $.* This is the first hotel you will come across. It's to the right from the Pana Pier. It's a large lump of cement with cell-like rooms that's quite popular with the backpack crowd. The big draw must be the terrace, which offers some amazing stargazing.

Hotel Martiza, *closer to town and also to the right of Pana Pier, 4 rooms, $.* This family run hotel offers basic rooms, a kitchen and hot showers. There is a nice garden overlooking the lake.

Hotel Ti'Kaaj, *4 rooms, $.* This nice spot, to the right from the Santiago Pier, has hammocks hung around its lush garden. Rooms are very basic (bed and dresser) and all share a bath. In the evening a disco-bar makes some noise so don't stay here unless you want to party into the wee hours.

Hotelito El Amanecer, *5 rooms, $.* This hotel, also to the right of Santiago Pier, has comfortable rooms that are nicely decorated and have private baths with hot water. Some even have a view of the lake. The garden needed watering while I was there.

Thermal Waters, *$,* has teepee rooms that sleep up to four. You can also camp here. A terrific organic restaurant serves vegetarian meals.

Hotel San Francisco, *6 rooms, $.* The San Francisco is located at the top of the hill, straight up from the Santiago Pier, and offers great views from the cozy rooms and the large terrace. There is a shared kitchen, which adds to the congenial atmosphere.

Hotel Mansion del Lago

Hospedaje San Francisco, ☎ *502/7-721-8016, $.* This hotel is the farthest from the main dock (it's about 10 minutes away, up from the Santiago Pier). It has a nice patio with flowers and the basic rooms are clean and have private baths. This property offers the best long-term rates, so many visitors have taken up residency here.

Hotel Mansion del Lago, ☎ *502/5-811-8172, www.hotelmansiondellago.com, 18 rooms, $$.* This is the town's premier hotel. Comfortable, clean rooms have views of the lake. An on-site Internet café has great coffee and there's also a rooftop Jacuzzi. Beside the Santiago Pier.

Hotel Casa Elena, *6 rooms, $.* This is an enjoyable family-run pension, also beside the Santiago Pier, with clean rooms and comfortable beds. The bathrooms are all shared, but there is a good supply of hot water. A private dock is great for swimming.

WHERE TO EAT

The cheapest places to eat are the ***comedores*** along the Santiago Pier. They offer typical fare such as rice and beans, tortillas, chile enchiladas, fruit *licuados* and fried plantains. They are all good.

There are also of plenty tourist restaurants in San Pedro. Most cost about US $3.

Nick's Place is right beside the Pana Pier. It's *the* place to hang out and is extremely popular with locals and tourists alike. It's got a terrific view of the lake, plus good coffee, freshly baked breads served with cheeses, soups, salads and main dishes such as chicken and fish.

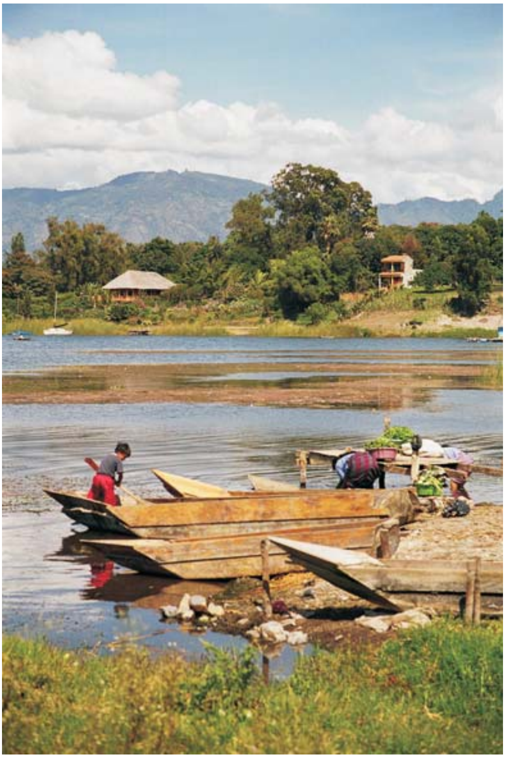
Restaurant Pinocchio, straight up from the Santiago Pier, has super food, including homemade pastas, good burgers, excellent salads and great cakes. Breakfast here is the best meal – huge and economical. The wine list is surprisingly good. Upstairs is another popular spot, **D'Noz**, offering a simple menu with sandwiches and soup. It also has free movies, board games and a lending library.

Café Munchies. The name says it all. Come here and sit in the lovely garden to enjoy healthy meals of tofu burritos, soups, salads and sandwiches.

Café Arte is a combination art gallery and café displaying the works of two of San Pedros famous primitivist painters. Rafael Gonzalez and Gonzalez Chavajay are both internationally recognized artists. They paint the local landscapes and people using print colors and simple designs. You can buy their art directly at the café or just enjoy it while you have a well cooked meal.

SANTIAGO ATITLÁN

This village is on the far end of the lake and takes 45 minutes to reach from Panajachel by ferry. After Pana, it receives the most tourists, but has managed to maintain its old way of life. Everyone wears colorful native garb and participates in native traditions. The *huipiles* worn here are famous and often feature intricate embroidered patterns such as birds


© Bruce Girin

Local boats

and flowers. The women wear *toyacal* headdresses made from 10 meters of brilliant red cloth wrapped in a coil; the women of Santiago are some of the most photographed Maya in Guatemala. The *toyacal* is featured on the 25 *centavo* coin. Farming and fishing used to be the main industries, but they are now practiced only on a small scale. Locals make their living from coffee and selling their weaving.

Try to visit on a market day when there are more local vendors with their wares – Friday, Sunday or Tuesday. A permanent handicrafts market starts at the dock and goes all the way up Calle Principal. The vendors here a bit more laid back than in Panajachel and other villages. They take no for an answer after the third time.

THE QUETZAL KID DILEMMA

There are lots of "quetzal" kids in the villages that get a lot of tourist traffic, especially Santiago and Panajachel. They run up and ask for a quetzal, usually to spend on candy. Locals are trying to encourage these children to stay in school and not pass their childhood on the streets, but the lure of quetzals and candy is too strong. It's hard to say no to them, but when you give them money, remember that you are encouraging them to beg in the streets and lose out on their education. Your one quetzal can do a lot of damage. If you feel inspired to help them, make a donation to one of the charitable organizations that focus on this problem. You will be contributing toward the community in a more positive way. See the *Appendix*, page 480, for a list of organizations that are helping.

HISTORY

Santiago was the original capital of the **Tz'utujil Maya**. They settled here in the late Post Classic period (AD 900-1400) and shortly after started skirmishes with nearby tribes. When the **Spanish** arrived in 1524, the Tz'utujil were having a bloody war with the **Cakchiquel Maya**. After Alvarado did his trademark divide-and-conquer routine, the **Catholic Church** was left in charge. It set about building a cathedral and baptizing all natives. Fortunately, none of the priests quite got the hang of the Tz'utujil language and, since none of the Tz'utujil would learn Spanish, they were left alone to develop their own brand of Christianity. They have managed to keep their Maya shamans and gods alongside the Christian saints.

Locals entering hidden place fo worship

From 1980 until 1990, Santiago was targeted for the "scorched-earth" campaign waged by the Guatemalan army. Torching of homes, threats, beatings and assassinations of suspected communists became quite common. (Read more about this period in history on page 7.) Ironically, the same institution that took away many of their rights fought the hardest for the Tz'utujil during this dark period. Father Stanley Rother opened the cathedral as a refuge for many of the targeted families and brought international attention to their plight. He had been working in the area for 13 years building clinics and schools and was already branded a communist when, on July 28, 1981, he was murdered in his rectory while sleeping. Santiago rose up in protest and the campaign to purge the army from its region lasted for nine years. When 13 people were gunned down on December 2, 1990 outside the town of Panabaj, over 20,000 people protested and the army was finally forced to leave the area. At that time, the elders in Santiago also kicked out the local police force and have been running things themselves with few problems. The village has become a role model for other Indian villages along the lake who want the army gone.

SIGHTSEEING

The **cathedral** (The Martyrs of Santiago Atitlán) in Santiago is one the oldest buildings in the area. Franciscans arrived in 1538 and began construction in 1571. The building was completed in 1582. It survived several earthquakes, but was severely damaged in the 1976 quake. It has since been restored, including the original bell tower. Inside the church are wooden statues of saints dressed in clothing made by the local woman. Every year the saints get a change of clothes. The devotion shown to these doll saints is touching. The pulpit and altar are intricately carved with pictures of quetzals and corn (the Maya believe men were made from corn). There are several renditions of Yum-Kaz, the Maya god of corn. Under the west arch are three plaques denoting the **Martyrs of Santiago Atitlán Monument**. The plaques honor Father Stanley Rother and other church members killed by the army. When Rother was killed, the villagers requested that his heart remain in the church and built this plaque to indicate its final resting spot. Each December they hold a week-long festival in his honor. The rectory next door has been turned into a shrine with an exhibit of Rother's personal belongings and a bible. On the floor where he died locals maintain a permanent candlelight vigil. This is a very moving place to visit

Maximón, the mischievous scoundrel, is popular in Santiago, but there is a controversy over his presence. The more right-wing Christian Evangelists are trying to get him banned, since they believe he is a heretic. But Maximón remains as part of the great trickster tradition found in many indigenous religions and to his loyal followers he is an integral part of their lives. Maximón is the one who answers their prayers and helps them in their hour of need. The fact that he smokes, drinks and enjoys the occasional romp only makes him more real. Many locals have been upset by his expulsion from the church and exclusion in the Holy Week celebrations. Without a permanent home, Maximón resides in one of the local houses. He is moved every so often by one of the elders. If you would like to visit this Maya saint, ask one of the local boys to bring you to "La Casa de San Simón." They will charge you Q10 to act as your guide. You will have to pay an additional Q10 to see the saint and even more to take his picture. Bring along a candle, cigar or some liquor if you want Maximón to be agreeable.

WHERE TO STAY & EAT

The two best hotels and restaurants are actually just outside of Santiago. In the downtown area, there isn't much selection.

Downtown

Hotel Tzutuhil Atitlán, *three blocks uphill on Calle Principal,* ☎ *502/7-721-7174, 26 rooms, $.* You can't miss this bright pink five-story hotel; it's the only modern building in town. Rooms are large, with good views and double beds. Ask for one with a private bath and cable TV for US $2 more – they are much nicer and considerably cleaner. The rooftop terrace is a wonderful place to watch the sun set over the lake. A downstairs restaurant serves decent food such as roast chicken, fried fish and pasta. No credit cards.

Restaurante Wach'Al, *two blocks up from dock.* This small eatery offers great sandwiches, excellent burgers and fries, and good fruit drinks. It's a great place to catch a quick bite. Q10-20. No credit cards.

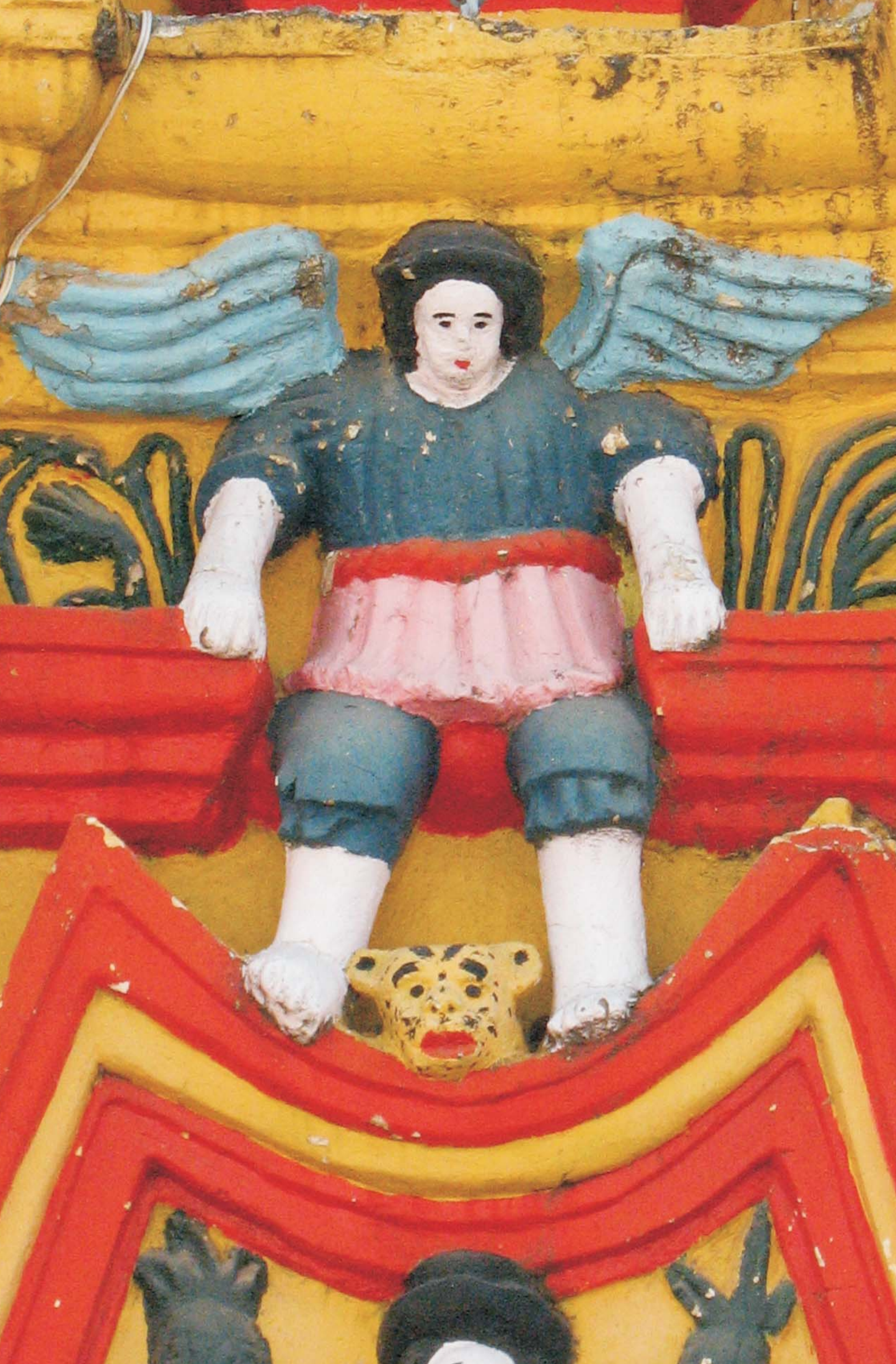
Restaurante El Pescador, *main street, corner of Market and Cathedral.* This popular outdoor café caters to tourists. It gets a nice breeze from the lake and has cute little tables. The menu offers excellent fish cooked in a variety of styles, good pasta and chicken. El Pescador fills up fast. US $3-6.

Restaurante Brisas del Lago, *just down from central plaza.* This is another simple café with nice wooden tables and chairs. It has fairly decent fruit salads, sandwiches, fried chicken and French fries. It's also the cheapest place in town. Q3-10. No credit cards.

Outskirts of Town

Posada de Santiago, *a half-mile south of town on the road to San Pedro, ☎ 502/7-721-7366, www.posadadesantiago.com, 12 rooms, $$.* Surrounded by an avocado grove and coffee plantation, this hotel offers rustic stone-walled cottages with all the comforts of home. Each has a comfortable bed, fireplace and balcony with views of the garden and lake. Local artwork from neighboring villages is displayed throughout. An excellent restaurant serves gourmet food. Bread and pastries are baked daily, and marinated fish, fowl and meat are prepared in their special steam-smoker. The ice cream is homemade and the coffee organic. Canoe and mountain bikes are available for all guests.

Hotel & Restaurant Bambú, *a half-mile east of town on the road to San Lucas Tolimán, ☎ 502/7-721-7332 or 7333, www.ecobambu.com, 5 bungalows, $$.* The gardens and restaurant here are first rate. Bright bungalows are carefully arranged in a garden that has been organized according to plant type. Stone pathways connect each bungalow to the garden. Rooms are neat and elegant, with red tile floors and balconies offering views of the garden. The grass-roof restaurant serves Guatemalan and Spanish fare in an A-frame dining room that features a fireplace, exposed beams and views of the lake. Most of the fruits and vegetables served come from their own gardens. This is a lovely oasis.



Los Altos

The region of Guatemala referred to as Los Altos is made up of four departments: **Quetzaltenango**, **Totonicapán**, **San Marcos** and **Huehuetenango**. The region is known for its indigenous villages wedged between volcanoes and the tallest mountain range in Central America, the **Sierra de los Cuchumatánes**. These mountains reach upwards to 13,123 feet (4,000 meters) and the dramatic landscape is wild and intensely beautiful. Few tourists make it as far north as Los Altos, but those who do will experience the very heart of Guatemala.

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- San Marcos 228
  Tecún Umán 228

HISTORY

Los Altos has always been a fiercely independent part of Guatemala and never quite joined the rest of the country. On February 2, 1820, the departments of Quetzaltenango, Totonicapán, Sololá, San Marcos, Quiché, Retalhuleu and Suchitepequez formed the **Republic of Los Altos** and demanded recognition from the Supreme Court of the newly formed Guatemala. The lack of response didn't stop the leaders of the new state; they held elections for a provisional government that declared Quetzaltenango the capital. When Los Altos tried to secede from Guatemala in 1948, **President Carrera** brought in the army to squelch the uprising. The area was able to retain some of its autonomy simply because of its distance from the capital and for a while Los Altos was an economic and cultural force. The glory days ended in 1902, when the region was hit with an earthquake and volcanic eruption.

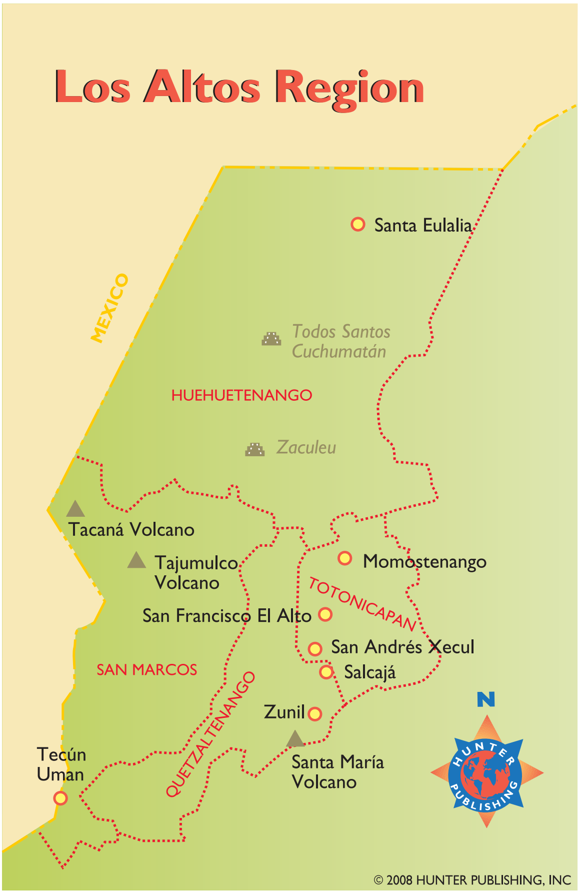
Life remains hard in Los Altos with many people struggling to make a living from growing coffee, maize, apples, rice and cardamom. Cattle and sheep ranches, as well as factories, play an important role in the economy.

Opposite: Detail, Xecul church © Shelagh McNally

The area is famous for its weavers. Tourists come to experience the indigenous culture, study Spanish at excellent schools, and explore the volcanoes, mountains, hot springs and lagoons.

Department of Quetzaltenango

The department of Quetzaltenango is west of Lake Atitlán and rests in a large basin on the southern side of the Cuchumatánes Mountains. Because it has the most fertile land in Los Altos, many people have made their homes here. It was originally settled by the **Quiché Maya** in the Early Classic period (AD 200-500), and was ruled by Zaculeu in the north, now the site of Huehuetenango. The Quiché invaded the area in AD 1400 and ruled it until 1524 when the **Spanish** arrived. The Dominicans and Franciscans spent many years trying to convert the Quiché to Christianity, but for the most part the Quiché resisted assimilation. During the 1900s, Quetzaltenango began developing into an economic stronghold. Today, it is the largest city in the region, followed by the textile centers of Salcaja and Zunil.


Los Altos Region
MEXICO
Santa Eulalia
Todos Santos Cuchumatán
HUEHUETENANGO
Zaculeu
Tacaná Volcano
Tajumulco Volcano
Momostenango
TOTONICAPAN
San Francisco El Alto
San Andrés Xecul
Salcajá
SAN MARCOS
QUETZALTENANGO
Zunil
Santa María Volcano
Tecún Uman
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QUETZALTENANGO/XELA

The capital city of Quetzaltenango is called by its Quiché name, Xela (SHAY-la), a shortened version of Xelajú which translates as "beneath the 10 gods." The 10 gods are the volcanoes surrounding the city. The two names are interchangeable. Quetzaltenango is the official name used on maps, buses and the like, but all the locals refer to the city as Xela – the Maya name. The city itself is 7,654 feet (2,333 meters) above sea level.

© Shelagh McNally

Central park, Xela

Although it is Guatemala's second-largest city, Xela doesn't see the same numbers of tourists as other parts of the country. It's considered the capital of the modern Quiché Maya and is a city focused on commerce and trade. It prides itself on being "La Cuna de la Cultura" (The Cradle of the Culture), and has produced many of Guatemala's best writers, musicians and politicians. It has a large student population, with three universities and dozens of music schools.

Xela is gaining an international reputation for its **Spanish schools** and it has dozens of them. There is almost no English spoken in Xela, so it can offer a total immersion experience. The city is quite active during the day, but as the evening turns cool, things begin to close down.

This is a lovely city with cobblestone streets that wind past neoclassical architecture, lovely parks and colorful markets. It's a perfect base for exploring the smaller villages in Los Altos, whether on day-trips (you can reach hot springs and volcanoes) or on longer journeys.

HISTORY

Xelajú was part of the **Quiché Maya** kingdom ruled by **King Gucumatz**, who brought the Western Highlands under his control in AD 1400. The Quiché kept control of the area until **Alvarado** arrived in 1524. **Tecún Umán** was king at this time and was fighting with many of the other tribes who wanted their freedom. By pitting the tribes against one another, Alvarado was able to take control of the area quickly. But Tecún Umán refused to surrender and he met Alvarado in hand-to-hand combat just outside Xela on February 15, 1524. Legend tells of Alvarado gazing down upon the slain king dressed in his quetzal feathers and commenting on how he had never seen a more beautiful warrior. His Nahuatl allies renamed the city **Quetzaltenango**, or Land of the Quetzals.

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Greek-style statues surround the theater

Under colonial rule Xela prospered. It had fertile farmlands and served as a connection to the Pacific coast and its agricultural goods. In 1820, when Los Altos broke away from the newly formed Guatemala Republic, Xela was named its capital and there was a flurry of construction. The new city was built in the style of a Greek city state. When the independence movement was squashed in 1948, the city settled into the role of an economic force in the north, as a coffee-broker and storage center. It also established its excellent universities during this period and became so successful that it was considered a rival of Guatemala City. Its golden era ended on October 25, 1902, when Santa María Volcano erupted, triggered by a series of earthquakes. Over 5,000 people were killed and the city was completely destroyed buried under a mountain of volcanic ash. But rebuilding began promptly and by 1928 the city was operating well enough to install a new electric railroad that ran to the Pacific city of Retalhuleu. Xela never regained its former glory, but it has grown into a prosperous provincial city with a healthy economy.

Xela is currently experiencing rapid growth with a sprawling population that has taken over outlying farms and left many *campesinos* homeless. Unemployment is becoming an issue and many children are being sent out to work washing cars or shining shoes. Dozens of agencies here run volunteer programs that work to solve the problems and the city's future certainly seems brighter than that of Guatemala City.

GETTING HERE & GETTING AROUND

Xela is well connected to the rest of Guatemala by bus service. Most western cities have direct buses to Xela. The run from Guatemala City takes about 4½ hours; from Panajachel it's just under two hours. If you are coming from the east you will have to go to transfer in Guatemala City.

Xela does not have a central bus station. Buses from other departments come into the largest bus terminal, **Parque Minerva**, on the western side of town in Zone 3. Local buses heading for smaller outlying villages leave from the terminal on the eastern side of the city on 7a Av Calzada Independencia, Zone 2, near the **Monumento a la Marimba** (Marimba monument). First-class buses coming from Guatemala City will drop you off either at this terminal or at their downtown offices.

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Bus terminal

To get downtown from the Parque Minerva terminal, walk through the market and park and catch a bus to **Mercado Democracia**. That will drop you off and you will then have to walk 10 minutes downhill to the city center. Due to a dispute over fares, no local buses are allowed in the downtown core. You can take a cab into the downtown core for about Q30.

Driving a car is not practical in this city due to the many one-way cobblestone streets, lack of parking and horrendous traffic. Most hotels and restaurants are located within walking distance of the central plaza and taxis are cheap and plentiful.

SCHOOLS

SPANISH LANGUAGE

Spanish language schools have become big business in Xela and there are dozens of them. Originally, most offered participation in volunteer programs as part of the curriculum. The idea was to use part of the tuition fee to help finance the organization, while helping students learn Spanish by participating in community building. It was a win-win situation for all, but greed took over and some of the larger schools began asking a finder's fee from the organizations or used the students to work on their own farms. Donations started going missing as well. If you are interested in helping the community as you study, we recommend that you contact the organizations below directly.

Social Organizations - Xela

There are a number of local organizations always in need of a helping hand:

Labor Union of Quetzaltenango (Unión de Trabajadores de Quetzaltenango - UTQ), 11 Calle 0-05, Zona 2, ☎ 502/7-765-5040.

Habitat for Humanity (Habitat para la Humandidad), Av de las Americas, 950 Supercom Delco, 2nd nivel oficina 9, ☎ 502/7-763-5308.

Habitat Foundation Totonicapan (Fundación Habitat Totonicapan), 1a Av 3-34, Zone 1, ☎ 502/7-766-2845. Ask for Pedro.

Guillermo Toriello Foundation (Fundación Guillermo Toriello), 2a AV 7-15, Zona 1, ☎ fax 502/7-763-0649. Speak with Victor. This organization works on social and economic programs.

ICA Friends Project Reforestation (ICA Amigos Proyecto de Reforestación), 1a Calle 16-93, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-763-1871.

New Horizon Family Association (Family Asociación Hogar Nuevos Horizontes), 3a Calle 6-51, Zona 1, www.idealist.org. Helps with daycare and family programs.

Street School Escuela de la Calle, D15 7-61, Zona 3, ☎ 502/7-761-6083. Works with street children who have no family by giving them shelter and schooling.

The Coordinating Association of Spanish Schools of Quetzaltenango, **ACEEQ** (*Asociación de Eescuelas de Español de Quetzaltenango,* http://aceeq.tripod.com), insures that language schools listed with them offer 20 hours a week of one-on-one training with a university-trained teacher, as well as day-trips, cultural outings and proper diplomas. It also began monitoring the volunteer programs, home stays and

Opposite: Woman walking by theater © Shelagh McNally teacher working conditions. It established guidelines for payment of US $100-120 per student, per week. You can find more information on Xela's Spanish schools at www.xelapages.com and get sound consumer advice at Alert Xela at www.transformart.com/xela/index.htm.

The schools listed here area all members of ACEEQ:

Celas Maya, 6ta Calle 14-55, Zona 1, ☎/fax 502/7-761-4342, www.xelapages.com/celasmaya.

Centro Maya Xela, 21 Av 5-69, Zona 3, ☎ 502/7-767-0352.

Centro Bilingue Amerindia, 12 Av 10-27, Zona 11, ☎/fax 502/7-761-8535, 7-761-8049, www.xelapages.com/cba/.

Educacion Para Todos, Av el Cenizal 0-58, Zona 5, ☎/fax 502/5-935-3815, www.xelapages.com/paratodos/index.html.

Juan Sisay, 15 Av 8-38, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-765-1318, fax 502/7-763-2104, www.xelapages.com/juansisay.

Spanish School ICA, 19 Av 1-47, Zona 1, ☎/fax 502/7-763-1871, www.xelapages.com/ica.

Kie Balam, diagonal 12-4-46, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-761-1636, fax 502/7-761-0391, www.xelapages.com/kiebalam.

Miguel Angel Asturias, 8a Calle 16-23, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-765-3707, www.spanishschool.com/xelapages/.

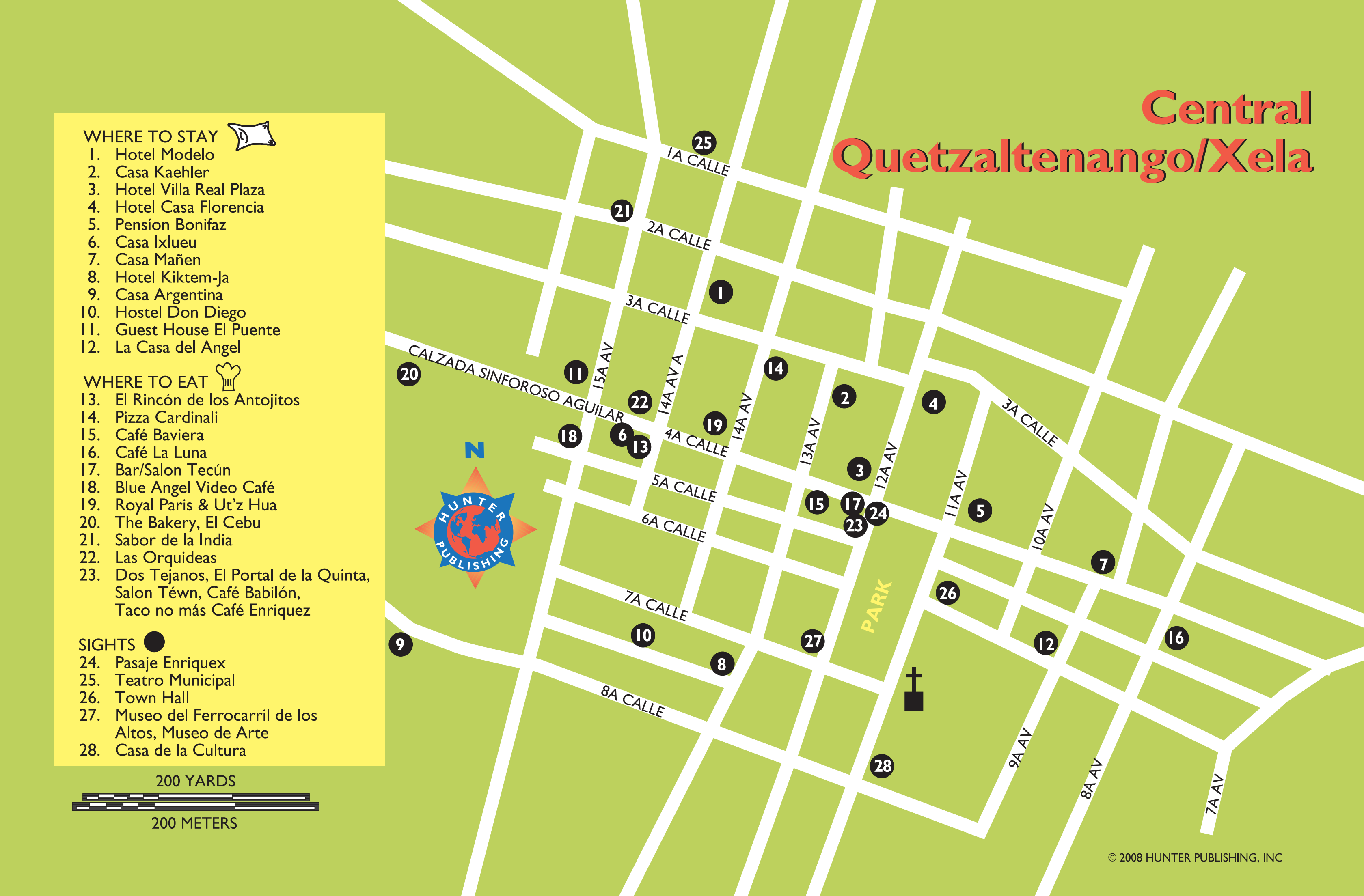
Minerva Spanish School & Cultural Center, 24 Av 4-39, Zone 3, Colonia Minerva, ☎/fax 502/7-767-4427, www.xelapages.com/minerva/index.htm.

Xequijel, 6 Calle 13-36, Zone 1, ☎ 502/7-765-8309/5528-5360.

Casa Xelaju, Callejon 15, diagonal 13-02, Zona 1, ☎ 502/5-083-0975. This school also offers online Spanish courses.

Proyecto Lingüístico Quetzalteco de Español (PLQE) has opened the **Escuela de la Moñtana** in the rural community of Nueva San José near Colomba at the foot of Santa Maria Volcano. It offers one-on-one classes taught by the local primary and secondary school teachers. Accommodations are with local families who work at the nearby coffee *fincas*. Students will also have a chance to help out in the various community projects being run by the PLQE. This is an excellent immersion program and offers foreigners a first-hand experience with cultures in the Western Highlands. Classes are $145 per week. For more information, contact PLQE, 5 Calle, 2-40, Zona 1, Quetzaltenango, ☎/fax 502/7-763-1061, www.hermandad.com/schools.html.

Central Quetzaltenango/Xela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200 YARDS
200 METERS

WHERE TO STAY
1. Hotel Modelo
2. Casa Kaehler
3. Hotel Villa Real Plaza
4. Hotel Casa Florencia
5. Pensíon Bonifaz
6. Casa Ixlueu
7. Casa Mañen
8. Hotel Kiktem-Ja
9. Casa Argentina
10. Hostel Don Diego
11. Guest House El Puente
12. La Casa del Angel

WHERE TO EAT
13. El Rincón de los Antojitos
14. Pizza Cardinali
15. Café Baviera
16. Café La Luna
17. Bar/Salon Tecún
18. Blue Angel Video Café
19. Royal Paris & Ut'z Hua
20. The Bakery, El Cebu
21. Sabor de la India
22. Las Orquideas
23. Dos Tejanos, El Portal de la Quinta, Salon Téwn, Café Babilón, Taco no más Café Enriquez

SIGHTS ●
24. Pasaje Enriquex
25. Teatro Municipal
26. Town Hall
27. Museo del Ferrocarril de los Altos, Museo de Arte
28. Casa de la Cultura

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WEAVING SCHOOL

The highlands are famous for their flawless handwoven textiles that are made by using unique techniques. Learning Guatemalan weaving has become a popular pastime with tourists and Xela now has a several weaving schools run by local women. The best school of the bunch is run by the **Association of Women Weavers** (TRAMA, *Asociación de Mujeres Tejedoras*) at 3a Calle 10-56, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-765-8564. TRAMA is a collective of 350 backstrap weavers that are Mam, Ixil, Cakchiquel, T'zutuhil and Quiché Maya women. The purpose of the group was to guarantee fair wages for the women weavers whose goods are sold in the markets throughout Guatemala. Profits, particularly from the tourist markets, very often don't make it back to these women. TRAMA's prices are little higher than those you will find in the markets, but the proceeds do go directly to the women and their families.

The school offers several excellent courses where you learn the different techniques, the history of weaving, how to select the best materials and how to combine different weaves. Prices range from US $50-115 per person for 40 to 60 hours of instruction. Accommodations with local families can also be arranged for a nominal fee. Non-students can visit the store which sells high quality, 100% cotton, pre-washed, preshrunk, and color fast materials, shawls, place mats and other goods.

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Parque Centraamerica

SIGHTSEEING

© Shelagh McNally

Parque Centraamerica

Parque Centramerica, between 5a Av Sur and 4a Av Norte, Zona 1. This park was constructed by the famed Latin architect Rafaél Perez de Leon between 1935 and 1942 and is considered one of the loveliest parks in Central America. Perez adorned the park with lampposts built like Greek columns and neoclassical monuments. There are plenty of benches beneath the giant trees and usually a vendor or two. On Sundays, the park hosts an excellent market where many locals from outlying villages come to sell their wares. Sundays are also celebrated with live marimba music and dancing.

Museo Quezaltenango, 7 Calle 11-09, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-761-6427. This eclectic museum at the south end of the park is in the Casa del Cultura del Occidente building, which resembles a Greek temple with bold columns and a sweeping staircase. On the ground floor a historical museum displays documents from the revolution of the State of Los Altos. Next door is the marimba museum, showing how the instrument is made. Upstairs is the Natural History Museum (*Museo de Historiá Natural*), which has displays of Maya artifacts, samples of local costumes and stuffed animals. There is also a collection of antique soda bottles. It's a weird mix, but fun to visit. Open 8 am-12 pm and from 2-6 pm, Monday to Friday, and 9 am-1 pm, Saturday. Admission is Q7.

Museo de Ferrocarril de los Altos, 12a Av at 7 Calle, Zona 1, no phone. This museum is dedicated to the railroad that once connected Xela to Retalhuleu. It has old photos, displays and historical records. Upstairs is the Jésus Castillo of Quetzaltenengo National School of Music (*Escuela Nacional de Musica Jésus Castillo de Quetzaltenango*). Founded in 1948 to honor one of Guatemala's foremost composers, the school offers a variety of musical degrees, including marimba. Its graduates include many famous Guatemalan musicians, earning the school an international reputation. Admission is Q7.

Palacio Municipal, 4a Av Norte, Zona 1. This grand 1897 building has a neoclassical style with decorated Corinthian pillars and intricate stone carvings. It serves as the town hall but at one point was a mansion for the governor. The grounds are built around a palm tree with the state flag depicted with plants and flowers. On each side are Greek columns and a monument to President Barrios, who ruled from 1873 to 1885. Open daily, 8 am-7 pm. No admission charge.

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Cathedral

Metropolitan Cathedral, 4a Av Norte, Zona 1. This large cathedral was built in 1879. It has a baroque façade and niches that hold life-size sculptures of various saints. Unfortunately, the church was severely damaged in the earthquake of 1902 – the only thing that survived was

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Pasaje Enriquez

the façade. In back is a large, modern concrete church that doesn't have much character.

Pasaje Enriquez, 5a Av Sur, Zona 1. This passageway was built in 1900 by the architect Alberto Porta and decorated by the sculptor Luis Liutti. The elegant passageway has combined elements of Greek, Moorish and baroque design and features a glass archway. Liutti sculpted the front with beautiful designs and created a special floor for shops and hotels. For many years it was deserted, but in the last few years the city has restored this area and it has become a social center with lots of great restaurants. Pasaje Enriquez has been adopted as an icon for the city.

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Teatro Municipal, 14a Av at 1a Calle, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-761-6427 or 761-2218. Xela takes pride in its role as the cultural center for the Western Highlands. In 1884, the city commissioned a group of artists and architects to build a Greco-Roman style theater. The results are a rather imposing

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One of the theater's many statues

building with large pillars holding up a vaulted roof over arched doorways. A wide staircase leads to a plaza that's decorated with busts of local artists, including Guatemala's first poet laureate, Osmundo Arriola (1886-1958), and great marimba composer and defender of Maya music, Jésus Castillo (1877-1949). The tiered box seats set over three levels resemble those found in the grand opera houses of Europe. The theater offers many excellent concerts and recitals.

Mercado Democracia, 15 Av at 2 Calle, Zona 3. This is a huge market with a labyrinth of stalls selling almost everything you could find in Guatemala. It's geared for the locals and there aren't many handicrafts, but it's worth a visit to see the hustle and bustle.

Iglesia San Nicolas, 4 Calle at 15 Av, Zona 1. This monstrous neo-Gothic church was built in the late 19th century. Its imposing front features sharp arches and a tall, lean steeple. Take a look at the ornate stained-glass windows and neo-Gothic artwork inside. Behind the church is a large domed building that serves as a school.

Parque a Benito Juárez, 15 Av at Calle 3, Zona 3. This park used to be known as La Democracia, but changed its name in honor of Benito Juárez, the Mexican revolutionary in recognition of Xela's Mexican community. It hosts a long and loud Independence Day party every September 15th. See *Festivals*, page 30.

Templo Minerva y Mercado, 6a Calle, Zona 3. This replica of a Greek temple was built in honor of President Barrios, who was a great supporter of education. Minerva was the goddess of knowledge and learning, and it was hoped the building would inspire the youth of Xela. Today, they use it as a place to hang out and watch the cars whizzing by on both sides of the temple (urban expansion has placed the temple in the middle of a busy intersection). Beside the temple is a little zoo with a rather sad collection of animals. The gigantic Minerva Market is the economic heart of the city, where you will see Indian traders from all over Los Altos doing business. It's colorful and very hectic. The bus terminal is also located here, so you'll no doubt find yourself in the market at some point during your travels.

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Puente de Los Chocoyos, 15 Av at diagonal 11. Every rainy season during the 19th century, a river flowed down Calles los Choyocos, now 15 Av, and people were unable to get from one side of the street to the other. So the city set about building a bridge. On December 23rd, 1883, Puente de los Choyocos (Choyocos Bridge) was unveiled. It cost Q700, about US $100 – a small fortune at the time – because it had a wood base, a body of lime slate and two lovely staircases, one on either end. Although esthetically pleasing, the construction was not stable and by 1893 the bridge needed major repairs. The money was raised and

Puente de los Chocoyos was rebuilt, but after the 1908 eruption it almost collapsed. All the wood was replaced with steel, but even that did not make the bridge stable. In 1928 the municipality completely rebuilt the bridge, keeping the original design. Today, the river no longer flows down this street so the bridge is simply a beautiful landmark.

ADVENTURES ON FOOT

HIGHLAND TREK

Several companies, including **Quetzaltrekkers**, Casa Argentina, diagonal 12, 8-37, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-765-5895, www.quetzaltrekkers.com, offer an incredible highland trek leaving from Xela and traveling to San Pedro La Laguna on Lake Atitlán. The Quetzaltrekkers tour begins just outside of town and travels from the valley up to the cloud rainforest. It passes through remote mountain villages along an incredibly scenic trail. On day one you travel to the small village of Xetinamit and set up camp for the evening. On day two you hike to the village of Santa María Visitacion, 1,312 feet (400 meters) above the lake where there is another campground. Day three is a hike to San Pedro for a swim in Lake Atitlán. You return to Xela by bus that afternoon. The San Pedro Trek is usually offered every weekend, but the company will run a weekday trip for groups of four people or more. The cost is US $65 per person, which includes all transportation, vegetarian meals, camping equipment and a professional mountain guide.

VOLCANO ADVENTURES

CHICABEL LAKE & VOLCANO

Volcán Chicabel is 10 miles (16 km) from Xela and spans across the San Marcos and Sacatepéquez department. This dormant volcano reaches 9,514 feet (2,900 meters) and has a well-formed cone at 8,897 feet (2,712 meters). Inside the cone is a 1,640-foot-wide (500-meter) lagoon with emerald water. The whole area around the lake is shrouded in a mist created as the hot volcanic water comes into contact with the cool mountain air. The local Quiché and Mam believe this lagoon is a sacred place and come here to burn copal and candles while making offerings to the gods for rain and good harvests. They place wooden crosses with prayers on them throughout the woods. On May 3, the Maya New Year, shamans from the various tribes meet here to conduct rituals.

This is a nesting ground for the quetzal bird and several other species, so birding is excellent when the skies are clear. From the volcano's summit you can see the lake and surrounding forests. Swimming or camping in this area is not permitted.

GETTING HERE: *Take a bus from Xela to San Martin, Sacate-péquez. It's a 1. 86-mile (three-km) hike from San Martin to the volcano, but there are usually pickup trucks along the highway giving rides for a few quetzals. The hike up to the lagoon takes 45 minutes along a well-cleared path that begins at the foot of the volcano. There are no services in the area, so bring food and water.*

SANTA MARÍA VOLCANO & SANTIAGUITO

Volcán Santa María dominates the landscape around Xela. It is part of a larger volcanic system that includes Siete Orejas (Seven Ears) and Chicabel volcanoes. Locals call this volcano *Gagxanul*, which means "naked mountain" – it has more rock surface than trees. Santa María reaches 12,275 feet (3,772 meters) and is one of the tallest volcanoes in the region. It was dormant for over 1,000 years until October 24, 1902, when it erupted with lava flows that reached over five miles (8.6 km), burying Xela under ash. The skies around the city were darkened for days and volcanic ash was found as far north as San Francisco in the US. It is considered to have been the largest and most explosive eruption of the 20th century and was great enough to blow a crater in the side of Santa María. Twenty years later, this crater gave birth to a small lava dome named Santiaguito. This is the newest volcano on the continent and it remains active, with lava eruptions every half-hour. From the Santa María summit you can see lava flowing from Santiaguito's crater. The incredible view also extends as far west as the Pacific Ocean and Tajumulco Volcano.

Santiaguito

GETTING HERE: *To get to Santa María you must first take a 20-minute bus ride to the village of Llanos del Pinal, where a dirt trail leads to the summit. The trail quickly becomes rocky and steep as it climbs from 8,202 to 12,371 feet (2,500 to 3,773 meters). Watch for the painted arrows that mark the way and keep an eye out for signs that say "NO" when you are heading in the wrong direction. It takes between three and five hours to reach the top, depending on your physical condition. It's best to do this climb early in the morning when visibility is good; afternoons are often cloudy and rainy.*

VOLCANO TOUR COMPANIES

Several companies offer volcano excursions that range in difficulty and price.

The non-profit **Quetzaltrekkers**, Casa Argentina, diagonal 12, 8-37, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-765-5895, www.quetzaltrekkers.com, offers trips that last from two to six days. All the proceeds from this tour go to the Escuela de la Calle (EDELAC), which helps the street children of Xela.

Adrenalina Tours, Pasaje Enriquez, 5a Av Sur, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-761-4509 or 7-767-2474, www.xelaenlinea.com/at, offers daily trips starting at $25 per person. Price includes transportation; your guide is extra.

Monte Verde Tours, 13 Av 8-34, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-761-6105, www.monte-verdetours.com, runs trips starting at $12 per person. Their hikes are considered easy to moderately difficult.

Kaqchikel Tours, 7a Calle15-36, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-765-8731, www.kaqchikeltours.com.

Proyecto Lingüístico Quetzalteco de Español (PLQE) has opened the Escuela de la Montaña in the rural community of Nueva San José, near Colomba at the foot of the volcano. See page 186 for a full review.

CERRO QUEMADO/LOS VAHOS

Cerro Quemado (Burned Hill) is an active volcano just 1.86 miles (three km) outside of Xela that rises to 10,489 feet (3,197 meters) above sea level. The natives call it *Catinocjuyup*, which means "fire underneath fire." This volcano last erupted in 1888, but it continues to belch gas and steam through several vents. Los Vahos (The Vapors) are the natural steam bath at the foot of the volcano. You can reach Los Vahos via several paths that lead up to the steam baths and go on to the summit. It's Q15 for a sauna/steam bath.

Los Vahos is a two-mile (3½-km) hike from Parque Centroamérica in Xela. The route is scenic as it passes by the mountains. Start off for the baths at 12a Av and walk uphill for half a mile (.8 km) to the trailhead. It's 1.4 miles (2.3 km) from there to the steam baths. Allow 1½ hours to reach Los Vahos.

GETTING HERE: *You can hike from town in about two hours (see above), or take any local bus going to the village of Almolonga and ask to be let off at the Los Vahos. Look for a tiny sign pointing to the path.*

TAJUMULCO VOLCANO

Tajumulco, in the department of San Marcos, is the tallest volcano in Central America. It has two separate peaks, the tallest reaching 13,845 feet (4,200 meters) with a 160-foot-wide (50-meter) crater on top. The lower peak is 13,451 feet (4,100 meters). This is one of the coldest places in Guatemala because of the elevation. Although the summit trail is relatively easy, with some very picturesque parts through pine glens, not many people hike here. The final ascent is the hardest part as the trail gets very steep just before it reaches the cone. Once at the summit, you can see Tacana on the Mexican border, the Pacific coast, Lake Atitlán, Xela, seven volcanoes around Antigua and the eruptions of Santiaguito.

© Quetzaltrekkers

View of Tajumulco from base

GETTING HERE: *You shouldn't climb this volcano on your own as the high altitude can cause breathing problems if you're not acclimatized. Sign on for a guided tour.*

TAJUMULCO TOUR COMPANY

The best tour is with **Quetzaltrekkers**, Casa Argentina, diagonal 12, 8-37, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-765-5895, www.quetzaltrekkers.com. You leave early Saturday morning for the village of Tuichan, where the trail begins. You spend Saturday night camping at the lower summit here. Just before dawn on Sunday you begin the ascent to the summit to watch the sunrise. The rest of the day is spent hiking back down. The cost is US $50 per person, including all transportation, vegetarian meals, camping equipment and a professional mountain guide. All the proceeds from this tour go to the Escuela de la Calle (EDELAC) to help the street children of Xela.

DAY-TRIPS

THERMAL BATHS OF ALMOLONGA

Almolonga is a small rural community just 1.86 miles (three km) from Xela; it was originally founded in 1839. It's quite a prosperous village, with most of the Indians owning their own land and participating in a lucrative vegetable export business. The village market held on Wednesday and Saturday is quite intense as people come to haggle for the best deals on vegetables and flowers. While the women of Almolonga still wear orange *huipiles* and woven headbands, the village

Church, Almolonga

has abandoned its religious traditions in favor of Evangelism. There are more than 25 Evangelist churches in the area, and residents attend services at least once a day. The new religion is credited for lowering the rate of alcoholism, as well as for the area's bountiful crops.

On the outskirts of the Almolonga are **Los Baños**, a series of steam baths heated by the thermal waters from Cerro Quemado. It is believed these waters have curative powers and many locals bathe in them. Several companies offer private sunken bathtubs where you can enjoy the hot waters. Cost is Q10. Keep in mind that these baths are 100 years old and not very elegant. You can also access the steam baths, Los Vahos, from here. It's about a 40-minute hike. Open 5 am to 10 pm daily.

Nearby is **Los Chorros**, a series of swimming pools also fed by the underground thermal waters. Both baths are open from 5 am to 10 pm daily.

GETTING HERE: *Local buses leave from Xela and head to the baths every half-hour. Just ask to be let off at Los Baños just past the city. The last bus from Los Baños to Xela leaves at 7 pm.*

GLASS FACTORY AT CANTEL

Originally known as Chuijllub (on the hill), Cantel is an industrial village located between Almolonga and Zunil, about eight miles (12 km) from Xela. The town's Cantel Fabrica is the huge factory that produces 25% of Guatemala's textiles. There is also a small glass factory run by a group of artists. Founded in 1976, Cooperativa Artesania de Vidrios (COPAVIC) uses a variety of glass-blowing techniques to create unique pitchers, glasses, dishes, statuettes, ash trays, candleholders and vases. The glass they start with is recycled. COPAVIC offers tours of its factory and also has a wholesale store that will ship purchases internationally. For more information, contact **COPAVIC**, Carretera al Pacífico Km 217.5, Canton Pasac II, Cantel, Quetzaltenango, ☎ 502/7-763-8038, www.copavic.com.

GETTING HERE: *Catch a local bus from Xela to either Almolonga or Zunil and ask to be let off at the factory. Cantel is just past the Las Rosas junction on the main highway.*

ZUNIL

Six miles (10 km) outside of Xela is the colonial town of Zunil. When it was founded in 1529 it was known as Santa Catarina Zunil, but over the years the name has been shortened. This is an attractive village set in a lush valley at the foot of Zunil Volcano. Many of the houses have red tile roofs offsetting the white cathedral.

The beautiful Río Samala runs through the village, dividing it in two: on one side is the center core, on the other the Chacap neighborhood.

The indoor **market**, on Tuesdays only, is particularly colorful, with everyone dressed in flamboyant traditional dress. Unlike its neighbor Cantel, Zunil has retained its indigenous religion and remains loyal to the Maya Saint **Maximón**, also known as San Simón (see page 176 for more information). If you would like to visit this rascal saint to present him with a cigar or swig of liquor, ask one of the local children to take you to "La Casa de San Simón." They will ask you for a small tip. Q5 is plenty.

Iglesia Zunil

© Shelagh McNally

Iglesia Zunil in the center of town is worth a visit. It was built in the mid-16th century and has eight pairs of ornately carved serpentine columns matching the silver altar inside. The altar is now behind a locked gate to protect it from thieves but you can still enjoy the intricate work. Open daily.

Zunil is famous for its beautiful textiles. **Cooperativa Santa Ana** offers individual weaving classes on the waistloom and footloom taught by local members. This cooperative was founded in 1970 and has 550 members. It sells 100% cotton handwoven clothes, purses, linens and shawls. Prices are quite reasonable, if a little more than you would pay in the market, but all proceeds go directly to the women. Open daily, 6:30 am to 7 pm. For information on classes, contact Cooperativa Integral de Produccion Artesanal Santa Ana R.L., 5a Av 6-15, Zona 1, Canton Xesiguan, Zunil, Quetzaltenango, ☎ 502/7-765-5379, coop_santa_ana@yahoo.com.

FUENTES GEORGINAS HOT SPRINGS

© Las Fuentes Georginas

In the hills above Zunil are the splendid Fuentes Georginas hot springs, probably the most beautiful natural spa in the country. Amid lush jungle and tropical flowers is a series of thermal pools all with different temperatures. Guatemalans from across the country come to sit in the waters, which are said to have curative powers. The spa was built during the 1930s and named after the dictator Jorge Ubico, who apparently visited regularly. Despite the heat, everything remains fresh, cooled by mountain air.

The center was seriously damaged when Hurricane Stan hit in 2005; the swimming pool, bungalows and roads were buried under a landslide. The owners, along with help from the nearby community, began rebuilding immediately, first clearing out the five miles (eight km) of mud covering the road. The bungalows, restaurants and swimming pool have all been rebuilt and the center now has electricity. A restaurant serves Guatemala and international dishes and has a liquor licence. The new bungalows are charming and come with two large beds and a fireplace, along with a picnic area and BBQ. Guests have access to the pool at night. Cost is Q95 per person. Reservations are a good idea since the springs are popular with the locals. ☎ 502/5-704-2959, 5-904-5559 or 7-768-4742, www.lasfuentesgeorginas.com. Entrance to just the pools is Q20 for adults, Q15 for children; parking is Q10.

> GETTING HERE: *Buses to Zunil leave from Xela every half-hour or so. The church, market, weaving school and Maximón are all within walking distance in the village. Fuentes Georgina is four miles (eight km) from Zunil. You can walk there in just over three hours along a scenic uphill trail. Alternately, hire a pick-up truck at the central plaza in Zunil. Prices run from Q30 to Q70 for a return trip. Be sure to arrange a pick-up time or you will end up walking back to Zunil.*

SALCAJA

Just seven miles (11 km) northwest of Xela is the colonial city of Salcaja, one of Guatemala's main textile centers. Weavers here produce huge quantities of material used in traditional Maya clothing. You can see the fabric stretched out to dry on oversized looms in the streets. Although there isn't any historical evidence, Salcaja claims to be the first

© Shelagh McNally

Salcaja cemetery

Spanish settlement in the country with the first Catholic church. The San Jacinto church certainly is a beautiful example of early Spanish colonial architecture.

The town produces a drink known as *caldo de frutas*, or *rompopo*, a fermented fruit liquor that carries quite a punch.

The best day to come is **market** day, Tuesday, when the streets are filled with activity.

GETTING HERE: *Most northbound buses leaving Xela stop off at Salcaja. Just be sure to get off before the Cuatro Caminos junction. Direct buses do leave Xela twice a day, but they don't have a regular schedule. The village has no tourist services, so you will have to return to Xela at the end of the day. The last bus leaves at 3 pm.*

Weaver

WHERE TO STAY IN XELA

Nights in Xela can be get very chilly and most buildings don't have central heating, so look for beds with plenty of blankets, windows that close properly and showers with hot water. Hotels with fireplaces are simply the best.

Hotel Villa Real Plaza, *4 Calle 12-22, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-761-4045, 50 rooms, $$$.* This is one of the largest hotels in the city and it comes with all modern conveniences. Rooms are huge, with wall-to-wall carpet, double beds, cable TV, private bath and fireplaces. A covered courtyard with skylights houses a popular restaurant and bar. It can be noisy, so ask for a room at the back.

HOTEL PRICE CHART

Prices are per person

$	under US $25
$$	US $26-50
$$$	US $51-85
$$$$	US $86-125
$$$$$	over US $125

Casa Mañen, *9 Av 4-11, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-765-0786, fax 502/7-765-0678, www.comeseeit.com, 9 rooms, $$$.* This delightful B&B is furnished with hand-carved furniture, beautiful wall hangings and rugs. Everything has been put together tastefully and the effect is romantic and comfortable. Bedrooms are large and bright, with lovely homey touches such as rocking chairs and pillows. Each has a private bath, cable TV and a balcony with a view. Several rooms also have fireplaces. Breakfast is served in the small dining room downstairs, or you can wander up to the rooftop terrace with a stunning view of the city.

Pension Bonifáz, *4 Calle 10-50, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-765-1111, fax 502/7-761-2850, www.quetzalnet.com/bonifaz, 74 rooms, $$$.* This is the most famous hotel in Xela. Señor Bonifáz first opened this elegant colonial home in 1935 and the place quickly became popular with both local and foreign travelers. Rooms have wall-to-wall carpeting, private bathroom, hot water and cable TV. Some of the older rooms have marvelous old-fashioned bathtubs. There is a refined (and somewhat stuffy) dining room serving international fare, an indoor pool with Jacuzzi and a lovely rooftop garden.

Hotel Modelo, *14 Av A 2-31, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-761-2529, 22 rooms, $$.* This distinguished hotel opened in

1883. Most of the original furniture is still in the hotel, which gives it a lovely old-world flavor. The charming rooms have wooden floors and walls decorated with local textiles, and most open up onto small courtyards. Ask for a room with a fireplace for even more atmosphere. The restaurant here serves an excellent breakfast and lunch. If the hotel is full, ask about the annex across the street. It has another nine rooms that are in the $ range.

Hotel Casa Florencia, *12a Av 3-61, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-761-2811, 9 rooms, $.* This spotless hotel is just a few steps from the plaza. Rooms are spacious and airy, with wall-to-wall carpeting, cable TV and private baths with hot water. A small dining room serves breakfast. No credit cards.

Hotel Kiktem-Ja, *13a Av 7-18, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-761-4304, 20 rooms, $.* This centrally located hotel has tiny rooms that are nicely decorated and come with private baths and lots of hot water. Try for a room with a fireplace; they are the nicest and warmest.

Casa Ixlueu, *15 Av at 5 Calle, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-765-1308, fax 502/7-765-2584, 4 rooms, $.* This budget hotel offers clean but rather bare rooms with a B&B option. Rooms have private baths, double beds and small tables. For longer stays, ask about their fully equipped apartments that sleep two. They have a kitchen, living room, courtyard and cable TV. Unfurnished apartments are also available. Minimum rental for the apartments is one month. No credit cards.

Casa Argentina, *diagonal 12, 8-37, Zona 1 (Barrio Las Flores), ☎ 502/7-761-2470, 20 rooms, $.* This friendly hotel has a family atmosphere, making it a favorite with budget travelers. The rooms are clean and comfortable and have two double beds and shared baths. Three communal kitchens have purified water supplied. The owner, Doña Argentina Villaseca, is very helpful. Quetzaltrekkers has an office here, so planning a hiking trip is easy. Casa Argentina also offers long-term rentals. No credit cards.

Casa Kaehler, *13 Av 3-33, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-761-2091, 7 rooms, $.* This old-style European pension is just a few blocks from the central plaza. It has an odd assortment of different-sized rooms facing a small courtyard crammed with flowers and plants. Rooms are very basic. They have a double bed and are very clean and comfortable. The bathroom is shared, although one room does have a private bath (of course, it's more expensive). A common area is used by guests to relax. No credit cards.

Guest House El Puente, *15a Av 6-75, no phone*, 5 rooms, $. This intimate guest house feels more like a home than a hotel. The rooms are large, and there's a well-equipped kitchen and a grassy garden area. It's a great place to hang out, read, study your Spanish and meet other tourists.

La Casa del Ángel, *9a Av 6-22, Zona 1, % 502/7-761-2747, 5 rooms, $.* In this long narrow building, the rooms are side-by-side, facing a plant-filled atrium. Rooms are large with plenty of space with big, firm beds. The walls are adorned by angel sculptures for a homey and charming effect.

Hostal Don Diego, *7a Calle 15-20, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-761-6497, 6 rooms, $.* This comfortable hotel is run by a young Guatemalan couple who renovated an abandoned colonial, transforming it into a very pleasant and comfortable B&B. Rooms are basic, with two single beds and a table. The shared baths have plenty of hot water and a fantastic breakfast is served in a pleasant courtyard. No credit cards.

WHERE TO EAT IN XELA

There's no shortage of restaurants. Some have the same boring menu of lousy pizza, fries and burgers, but there are some wonderful restaurants with terrific menus. Xela really shines with its vast network of cafés and their excellent, affordable dishes. Elegant **Pasaje Enriquez** is finally coming into its own. It's now packed with great little cafés and restaurants.

Dos **Tejanos**, *Pasaje Enriquez*, serves terrific Tex-Mex food, including BBQ ribs, chicken and brisket. Q15-40 per person.

El Portal del la Quinta, *Pasaje Enriquez*, has delicious vegetarian meals. Don't miss their terrific soyburger. Q10-30 per person.

Salon Técun, *Pasaje Enriquez*, has been a bar since 1934 and it's still going strong. It's usually packed with a gang of locals and foreigners throughout the day and evening. It has a good basic menu offering pasta and pizza. But the real reason is to come here to drink and socialize. Q15-60 per person.

Café Babilón, *Pasaje Enriquez*, serves excellent sandwiches, tacos, crêpes, fondues and salads. A great place for lunch. Q 15-60 per person.

Tacos no más, *Pasaje Enriquez*, is a terrific place to stop for a quick snack of fresh tacos. Q10 per person.

Café Enriquez, *Pasaje Enriquez*, has a charming upstairs restaurant serving terrific sandwiches, salads, pastas, soups and salads. Their coffee is divine. Q15-60 per person.

Royal Paris, *Calle 14A 3-06, ☎ 502/7-761-1646.* One of the best restaurants in town, Royal Paris is located in a slightly dingy shopping complex, but inside it resembles a French bistro, complete with artwork and jazz. It offers a wide selection of innovative dishes. The curries and various chicken and fish dinners are all excellent, as are their salads, soups and sandwiches. An extensive wine list complements the food and a selection of European magazines is available for light reading. It's open late and usually filled with an international crowd. Q50-100.

Cardinali, *14 Av 3-25, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-761-0924, http://restaurantecardinali.com.* Benny Cardinali is a transplanted Italian who runs the best Italian restaurant in the region. Cardinali offers huge portions at reasonable prices. The homemade pastas and breads, soups, salad and, of course, pizza are all superb. There's an excellent wine list and the service is relaxed and personable. Q 42-70.

Pension Bonifáz, *4 Calle 10-50, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-761-2182.* Xela's elite meet here for the upscale atmosphere and service. The best meal of the day is lunch, which includes a selection of soups, salads and sandwiches. Dinner is a variety of beef, chicken and fish dishes served with rice, vegetables and soup. The prices tend to be higher here, but you're paying for the ambience. Q50-140.

Sabor de la India, *2a Calle 15 Av A, 2-34 Callejon 15, Zone 1, ☎ 502/7-761-9957.* Enjoy vegetarian, fish and chicken curries, rice, chapatis and stuffed paraths. The Lhassi are thick and delicious. Portions are huge and the service is excellent. Definitely worth a second visit. Q35-90.

Las Orquídeas, *4 Calle 15-45, Zona 1 inside Casa los Balcones, ☎ 502/5-604-0511.* This is the place to chow down on all your Thai favorites: green curry, pad Thai, spring rolls, stir-fry chicken with basil, satay and cashew chicken. Meals are served in a lovely courtyard. An excellent place for lunch or dinner. Q30-85 per person.

El Rincon de los Antojitos, *15a Av at 5a Calle, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-765-1308.* A few international dishes are offered here, but the specialties are typical Guatemalan dishes like *pollo pepian*, chicken in a spicy sesame and pumpkin sauce. Tamales are another favorite. Tasty vegetarian dishes are offered. Q35-50.

Blue Angel Video Café, *7a Calle 15-22, Zona 1.* This place offers great food at reasonable prices and is usually packed. Pasta dishes are the best options, but there are also great sandwiches and soups and plenty on the menu for vegetarians. In the back, a video room shows popular movies every evening. This is a great spot to network and meet other travelers. Q20-50. No credit cards.

Ut'z Hua, *12 Av 3-02, Zona 1.* This is the best place in Xela to try out typical Xela food. The *pollo en mole* (chicken in a chocolate sauce) should be first on your list. Adventurous eaters might enjoy *pollo jocón* (chicken with fresh coriander) or *pache*, a tamale prepared with mashed potato filling. Vegetarian plates are available upon request. Q20-50. No credit cards.

Hotel Modelo, *14 Av A 2-31, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-761-2529.* The best meal at this nice hotel is the large North American-style breakfast of pancakes, eggs, toast, yogurt, cereal and fruit. The food is good and the prices reasonable. Q15-40. No credit cards.

Café Baviera, *5a Calle 13-14, Zona 1.* A long-time favorite for both locals and visitors, this European-style café is decorated with photos from Xela throughout the decades. The coffee is roasted on the premises and served with terrific pastries and desserts. There is also a light lunch menu of sandwiches and other snacks. A great place to stop for breakfast. Q10-35 per person.

La Luna, *corner of 8 Av at 4 Calle,* ☎ *502/7-761-2242.* This sinful little café is also a chocolate museum. Trace 100 years of chocolate history and then pick out some to eat from their huge selection. You will get the best cup of hot chocolate here, which you can enjoy with glorious desserts. The coffee is also heavenly. A great place to hang out. Q15-50. No credit cards.

The Bakery, *18 Av and 1Calle, Zona 3.* This Mennonite-run bakery sells irresistible breads, pastries and cookies. Open Tuesday and Friday. Be sure to come early. Q10-20 per person.

Bierhaus, *4-50, Zona 3,* ☎ *502/7-767-4597.* Come here to drink beer, eat bar food and enjoy good music. The beer selection is outstanding, the food nothing special. Price depends on how much you drink. Beer starts off at Q15. No credit cards.

El Cebu, *20 Av 0-73, Zona 3,* ☎ *502/7-761-6421.* There isn't much atmosphere, but this is the place to come if you want steak. Any number of choice cuts are cooked to your specification on the grill. There is a well-stocked bar, so have a martini with that porterhouse. Locals love this place. Q35-100. No credit cards.

Department of Totonicapán

The department of Totonicapán is next door to Quetzaltenango. It is heavily forested with oak and pine trees and is well known for its artists, who work in leather, furniture, textile, pottery and wooden-toy factories. **Momostenango** in particular is famous for its blankets and ponchos, while **San Francisco El Alto** is well known for its animal market. The capital, **Totonicapán** is an important commercial center.

This is one of the few areas in Guatemala where locals have retained ownership of their land. When the 1595 document registering the lands to the Lords of Totonicapán was refused by the government, the communities banded together to create **Cinco Parcialidades**. Finally, in 1909, after several hundred years of fighting, the land was granted to the Indians. Since then they have effectively managed the forests, outlawing chainsaws and refusing to let lumber companies take over. There has been a lot of pressure

© Shelagh McNally

San Francisco El Alto market

to allow cutting of the sweet-smelling pinabete, the preferred Christmas tree for many of the newly converted Evangelist communities, and some of the villages now have a 24-hour security force to protect their forests.

Totonicapán has some of the most beautiful scenery in Guatemala, but is also one of the most remote regions. If you enjoy roughing it off the beaten track, then this is the place for you.

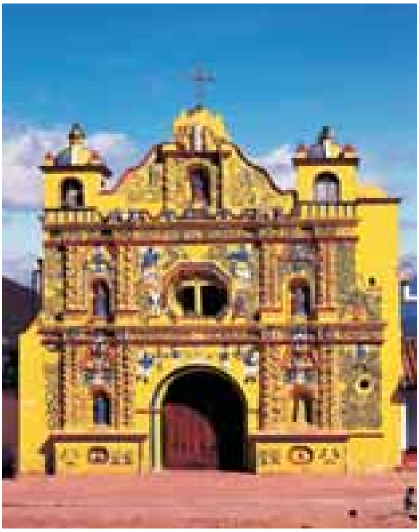
GETTING HERE & GETTING AROUND

Buses leave from Xela to all parts of Totonicapán. The roads are very rough in spots, so travel can be slow. Services are basic or non-existent in the smaller villages, but everything is close enough to Xela that you can easily visit the various villages on day-trips. Villages shut down by 7 pm, so there is little reason to stay over.

VILLAGES OF TOTONICAPÁN

SAN ANDRÉS XECUL

Just six miles (11 km) east of Xela is the little village of San Andrés Xecul with its unbelievable church painted a bright yellow and decorated in technicolor. Angels, tigers, monkeys, fruits, flowers, corn, quetzal birds and vines dripping with grapes cover the front of the church. It's completely wild and unorthodox – definitely worth coming to see. Inside are hundreds of candles and several macabre effigies of a bleeding Jesus. On a small hill behind the church are a number of altars where locals leave offerings to the gods. There are no hotels in town, so you must head back to Xela.



The colorful church

GETTING HERE: *You can get to Xecul by taking any northbound bus from Xela. Once you pass Cuatro Caminos junction, get off at the Esso station and walk or hitch a ride for the remaining 1. 86 miles (three km) to town. A couple of buses leave Xela and go directly to San Andrés Xecul, but they don't have a regular schedule.*

SAN CRISTÓBAL

This attractive small village is six miles (3.7 km) from Xela just past the junction at Cuatro Caminos. The village was built where Río Sija and Río Salamá meet, an important textile area that produces wool, silk and cotton. A number of **artisan workshops** in the village produce musical instruments, masks, wood toys, pottery and glass.

Recently, the local farmers' association restored the 17th-century Franciscan church, **Iglesia de San Cristóbal**. It has several beautiful altars covered with paintings and ornate silver pieces, the most elaborate of which is a figure of San Miguel. The church has been declared a national monument.

Throughout the week this is one sleepy town, but things pick up on Sunday, which is **market** day.

There are no hotels in town and most visitors either head back to Xela or head north to San Francisco el Alto or San Miguel Totonicapán.

GETTING HERE: *This is one of the easiest villages to visit because it is so close to Cuatro Caminos. Jump on just about any bus leaving Xela and get off at the junction. You can also take any bus going to San Francisco EL Alto, since they all pass through the village.*

SAN FRANCISCO EL ALTO

This village is 10 miles (17 km) east of Xela, 8,562 feet (2,610 meters) above sea level. Its narrow cobblestone streets are neatly lined with houses that overlook the valley below. Nothing happens here until Friday, when the largest **market** in Central America sets up shop. The market is geared to locals, so crafts are at a minimum. The

Animal market

real attraction is the **animal market**, where you can buy anything with fur to feathers to hooves. Watching the process of buying and selling animals is free street theater.

The beautiful **cathedral** here has been declared a national monument, despite some severe damage sustained in the 1976 earthquake. During the restoration process, beautifully painted murals were found underneath layers of limestone. You can pay the church caretaker a few quetzals and climb up to the bell tower for an incredible view of the market and valley.

GETTING HERE: *Buses leave from Xela every 20 minutes or so. The last bus from San Francisco to Xela departs at 5 pm.*

WHERE TO STAY & EAT

There aren't many restaurants in San Francisco. Try **Comedor San Cristóbal** on the central plaza. None of the hotels or restaurants accept credit cards.

Hospedaje San Francisco de Asis, *1a Av 3-70, Zona 1, 15 rooms, $.* A basic hotel with clean and comfortable rooms. It can get noisy the night before market day (Thursday evening), when the traders take over.

Hospedaje Los Altos, *1a Av at 6a Calle,12 rooms, $.* This is the largest and newest hotel in the village. It has large rooms with two double beds and private baths that sometimes have hot water.

MOMOSTENANGO

Momostenango, which means "city of altars" in Quiché, is 22 miles (35 km) from Xela, set high in the mountains. It's one of the few villages that still uses the ancient Maya calendar of 260 days. Shamans are also important here and they counsel the villagers using predictions from

Traditional Momo blanket

crystals or seeds. They also offer prayers and offerings to the gods on behalf of the villagers.

Momo, as locals refer to it, gets very cold at night. In order to stay warm, residents make **blankets** using a special technique of wool spinning and weaving. Their work features intricate designs and, in addition to blankets, they make soft shawls. You can see the dyed blankets being washed out at the nearby hot springs of Pala Chiquito. If you want to buy one, come to the Sunday market and be prepared to bargain hard. Momo artisans are really savvy when it comes to bartering, so you need some finesse to get a deal.

Just outside of town are the **Momostenango cliffs**, known locally as Los Riscos. Erosion of the pumice rock has created bizarre and surreal rock formations that look almost alien. To reach the stones, walk downhill from 2a Calle, cross the bridge and head uphill to the rocks.

Los Riscos

GETTING HERE: *There are six buses daily from Xela to Momo. You can also catch a bus at Cuatro Caminos junction or from San Francisco El Alto. The bus ride from Xela takes about 45 minutes. The last bus from Momo to Xela leaves at 4 pm.*

WHERE TO STAY & EAT

Hotel and food choices are limited. A number of *comedores* around the central plaza offer meals and beverages. **Comedor Santa Isabel** and **Comedor Aracely** are the most popular.

Hotel Estiver, *1 Calle 4-15, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-736-5036, 8 rooms, $.* This hotel is just down the street from the bus terminal. It has clean, simple rooms with shared baths. The single beds have wonderful Momo blankets on them, but that's about the only luxury.

Comedor y Hospedaje Paclom, *1a Calle, just off the plaza, no phone, 5 rooms, $.* The other hotel in town has shared rooms and baths. A nice courtyard here is filled with birds and plants.

SAN MIGUEL TOTONICAPÁN

San Miguel Totonicapán, known as Toto, is 18 miles (30 km) northeast of Xela. It is a heavily populated village surrounded by rolling hills and pine forests. Famous for its ceramics and weavings, it's a quiet town except on Tuesdays and Saturdays, when the **market** takes over. Local artisans are known for their wax figurines, wooden boxes and toys, furniture, Spanish instruments and tin plate made using an old Maya technique. The weavers here use an elaborate treadle loom to create their textiles. Wheat, corn and beans are also grown in the area and there are herds of sheep and goats on the hillsides.

You can meet local artisans at **Casa de la Cultura Totonicapense**, 8a Av 2-17, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-766-1575, housed in what used to be the municipal theater. There is now a small museum here with prehispanic art and textiles. This place offers a wonderful cultural exchange that introduces visitors to the local artists and their families. You get to watch artists at work while they explain the various techniques used. A home-cooked meal is offered, followed by an afternoon of music and dance. You can also arrange to stay overnight with a family for US $15 and to book tours to the smaller workshops, hot springs and Maya ceremonial sites. Prices range from US $13 to $25 per person.

The colonial **Iglesia San Miguel** was built in 1545 and Francisco Marroquín, Guatemala's first bishop, laid the first stone. The building was badly damaged in an 1878 fire and has yet to be repaired, but you can still go and see the lovely carvings and altar.

The town is especially lively between September 24 and 30, during the **Feast of San Miguel**. The area is also well known for its Easter passion plays. See the *Holidays & Festivals* section, page 30.

> GETTING HERE: *There are excellent bus connections from Xela to Toto. Buses leave in each direction every half-hour. The last bus to Xela is at 5 pm.*

WHERE TO STAY & EAT

There are lots of *comedores* in town, especially on market days when the place is crammed with stalls. During the rest of the week, your restaurants selection is limited to the hotel eateries.

Hotel y Centro de Convenciones Totonicapán, *8a Av and 8a Calle de la Zona Tenerias, ☎ 502/7-766-4458, www.larutamaya.net/hct, 26 rooms, $$*. Although it resembles an office building, this is the fanciest hotel in Toto, offering a combination of single, double or triple rooms. All are equipped with private baths, hot water, cable TV and decent furnishings. The on-site restaurant and cafeteria serves okay food and there's even a small convention center equipped with meeting rooms.

Hospedaje San Miguel, *8a Av 7-49, Zona 1, 8 rooms, $*. A pleasant yet plain hotel that's very clean and comfortable. Rooms are simply furnished and bathrooms are shared. It fills up quickly the night before market and the prices double. No credit cards.

Hospedaje Blanquita, *4 Calle, 3 Av, Zona 3, 6 rooms, $.* This budget hotel is opposite the gas station in town. Rooms are basic and clean. No credit cards.

Department of Huehuetenango

Huehuetenango is Guatemala's most northern department, sharing an eastern border with Mexico, southern borders with San Marcos, Quetzaltenango and Totonicapán, and a western border with Quiché. This area is dominated by the rugged **Cuchumatánes Mountains** and is a place of jagged peaks and deep valleys. Villages are located on a limestone plateau in the west and there's dense rainforest to the north. The traditional ways have been preserved and there are seven Mayan dialects spoken: Mam, Teko, Awakateko, Akateko, Chuj, Popta and Q'anjob'al. Spanish is a second language and English isn't heard.

Laguna Brava

The capital city of **Huehuetenango** is easily accessible and makes a good base for exploring the more remote regions such as Todos Santos. The most significant ruins in the area are found at **Zaculeu**.

HISTORY

Fossils and hunting tools have been found in the area, indicating that it was first settled during the Paleo-Indian period. Over 140 archeological sites have been located in the Cuchumatánes Mountains, attesting to over 1,000 years of occupation by the Maya. The **Olmec** were the first to settle in around 1500 BC. The sites of Santo, Chaculá and Libertad are similar to those Olmec sites found in Mexico. During the Early Classic period (AD 200-400) the **Mam Maya** began settling the area and developing the agricultural centers of Cambote, Pucal and Cucal. The largest

Cuchumatánes Mountains

site uncovered so far is **Zaculeu**, near the capital city Huehuetenango. During the Classic period (AD 600-900), the **Toltec** began invading the area, followed by the **Nahuatl** in the Post Classic period (AD 900-1500).

By the time **Spanish Conquistadors** made their way north in 1524, Zaculeu was an important trade center with many silver mines. The Spanish immediately took control of the silver mines, ran them empty, and quickly lost interest. They left the area in the control of Franciscans, who had little success in converting the people to Christianity and eventually withdrew down to Quetzaltenango. From 1820 until 1840, Huehuetenango was part of the Los Altos territory and remained independent of Guatemala City. However, when the independence movement was crushed, the area came under the control of the Guatemalan government who encouraged settlers to set up sugar and coffee plantations. The area was officially recognized as a department in 1877.

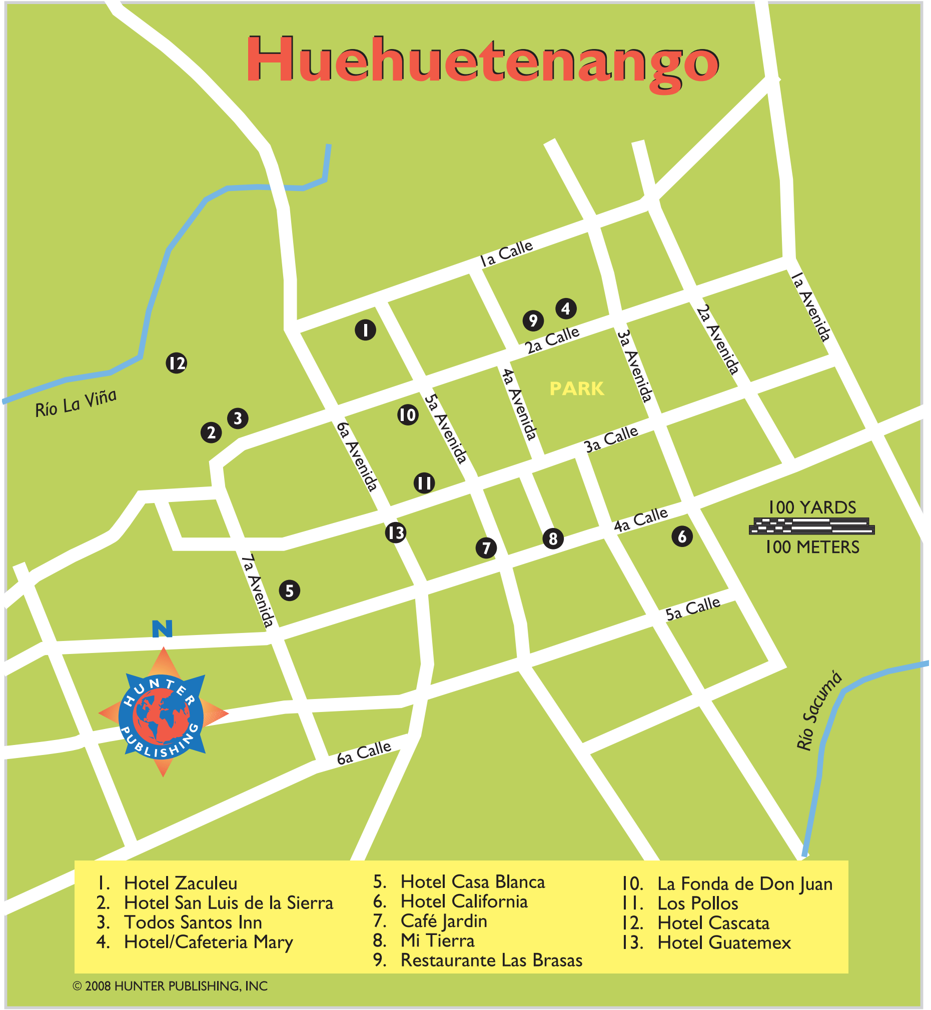
As the area opened up, many *Ladinos* came to work on the farms and settled throughout the region, making it one of the more heavily populated areas in Los Altos. Today, coffee, sugar, corn, beans, asparagus and broccoli grow alongside sheep that graze in ranches. Some of the mines are still productive and light manufacturing has also become an important part of the economy. The roads remain primitive, despite all the progress.

GETTING HERE & GETTING AROUND

The capital, Huehuetenango – also referred to as Hue-Hue – is the first city most people stop in when coming from Mexico. There are regular buses to the Mexican border town of La Mesilla/Ciudad Cuauhtemoc, as well as direct bus service from Quetzaltenango and Guatemala City. To visit any of the local villages around here you will have to take one of the chicken buses that leave from Hue-Hue.

HUEHUETENANGO

Huehuetenango is a dusty town whose streets are usually filled with huge trucks. It has a mixed population of *Ladino* and Maya. The town has two distinct personalities. The center is pretty sedate, with most commerce being done at one of the 40 banks lining the streets. A few blocks away is the huge Indian market, where the streets are crowded with people dealing and trading. The main bus terminal is located here.


Huehuetenango
1a Calle
2a Calle
3a Calle
4a Calle
5a Calle
6a Calle
1a Avenida
2a Avenida
3a Avenida
4a Avenida
5a Avenida
6a Avenida
7a Avenida
PARK
Río La Viña
Río Sacumá
100 YARDS
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N
HUNTER PUBLISHING
1. Hotel Zaculeu
2. Hotel San Luis de la Sierra
3. Todos Santos Inn
4. Hotel/Cafeteria Mary
5. Hotel Casa Blanca
6. Hotel California
7. Café Jardin
8. Mi Tierra
9. Restaurante Las Brasas
10. La Fonda de Don Juan
11. Los Pollos
12. Hotel Cascata
13. Hotel Guatemex
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There is very little to see in Hue-Hue, but it makes a good base for exploring the region and has a number of decent hotels and restaurants. The main attractions are the giant **relief map** built in 1880 in the Central Plaza and the large **neoclassical church** with Doric pillars and Grecian urns on its façade. Off the central plaza is the local **tourist office**, Centro de Información Turistica, Edificio de Gobernación, 2a Calle, Zona 1, ☎ 502/5-694-9354, that provide you with invaluable information on the city and whole department, if you want to head to remote areas.

SPANISH LANGUAGE SCHOOLS

Several schools in Hue-Hue teach both Spanish and Mam. They offer the usual 20 hours a week of one-on-one instruction combined with social and cultural activities. The cost is US $120-140 per person and includes accommodations with a local family. The schools will also help you make arrangements for visiting other parts of Huehuetenango.

Fundacion Vientitres, 6a Av 6-126, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-764-1478.

Multitecnica Latino Americo, 2a Calle 81-26, Zona 4, ☎ 502/7-764-2387.

Spanish Academy "Xinabajul," 6a Av 0-69, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-764-6631 or 1518.

SIGHTSEEING

CHIANTLA

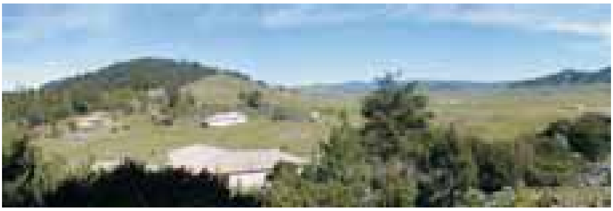
The small village of Chiantla is four miles (seven km) north of Hue-Hue. Its church, **Virgén del Rosario**, houses a silver statue of the Virgin given by a rich Spaniard who owned a local silver mine. The statue is believed to have miraculous powers to heal the sick and grant wishes, and people from all over Guatemala travel to the shrine to ask help from the great *madre* (mother). The church itself was built by Dominican friars and has interior murals, painted in 1950 by Carlos Rigalt, showing Indians toiling in the mines and seeing God. The largest pilgrimage to the church is on the feast day for the Virgin of the Rosary, February 2. See *Holidays & Festivals*, page 30.

Church, Chiantla

Another 2½ miles (four km) from town is **El Mirador**, where the plateau of the Cuchumatánes begins to climb to more than 9,842 feet (3,000 meters) above sea level. The view of the Huehuetenango Valley and surrounding mountains is extremely beautiful. A monument here was built to resemble a Maya temple and a plaque is inscribed with the famous poem, *A Los Cuchumatánes*. The poem was written by the Guatemalan poet Juan Diéguez Olaverri after he was exiled in Chiapas for his participation in the failed Los Altos revolution.

> GETTING HERE: *Buses leave Hue-Hue from 1 Av and 1 Calle every 20 minutes. From Chiantla you can walk the remaining distance to El Mirador or grab any bus heading north to Todos Santos.*

ADVENTURES ON HORSEBACK



Unicorno Azul

Unicornio Azul (Blue Unicorn), Hacienda Casco Chancol, Chiantla Chancol, ☎ 502/5-205-9328, www.unicornioazul.com. Unicornio Azul is a horse ranch set at the foot of the Cuchumatánes Mountains. It was started in 1998 by a Guatemala-French couple, Fernando Mejia and Pauline Decamps, who offer horseback rides into the mountains that last anywhere from one to nine days. The ranch also serves as an equestrian training center and, on longer journeys, each rider takes over the care and feeding of their equine friend. From November to May, trips head to Todos Santos, Laguna Magdalena and the surrounding areas; in March and April the rides go to the Ixil Triangle; and from June to August they are limited to the Huehuetenango plateau. You can also build your own itinerary. Rates are US $13 per hour, US $73 per day (five to six hours, including lunch, accommodation and guides).

You can opt to stay over at the ranch's hacienda-style hotel, which has an adobe roof and inner courtyard. Rooms have private baths, comfortable beds and spectacular views of the mountains. A full breakfast is included. *5 rooms. $.*

ADVENTURES ON FOOT

MOUNTAIN HIKE TO LAKE MAGDALENA

Twenty-one miles (35 km) north of Hue-Hue is a beautiful lagoon nestled between two mountains. The high mineral content gives the water its beautiful green color. Scattered in the surrounding fields are great boulders and, growing in-between them, ancient trees, bent and twisted from the constant winds. The tallest pines are the *Juniperus Standeleyi*, a tree found only in this region of the world. The scenery is very dramatic and beautiful, but the hiking is quite strenuous and you must be in excellent shape.

You must hire a guide to take you on the trail. It take three to four hours to reach the lagoon by horseback, and between six and eight hours on foot.

> GETTING HERE: *You can reach the lagoon either on horseback or on foot. A four-wheel-drive vehicle might be able to travel the road, except during the rainy season. Head to Paquix Village, 12 miles (20 km) northwest of Hue-Hue. Buses leave from the city every few hours. Once at Paquix Village, check in with the Paquixena Cooperative, which will help get you to Siete Pinos Village, the starting point for the trek. At Siete Pinos you'll find lodging and guides; horses can be hired at the Posada de las Altas Nubes.* ***Unicornio Azul*** *(see above) also offers horseback tours to the lagoon.*

MAYA RUINS

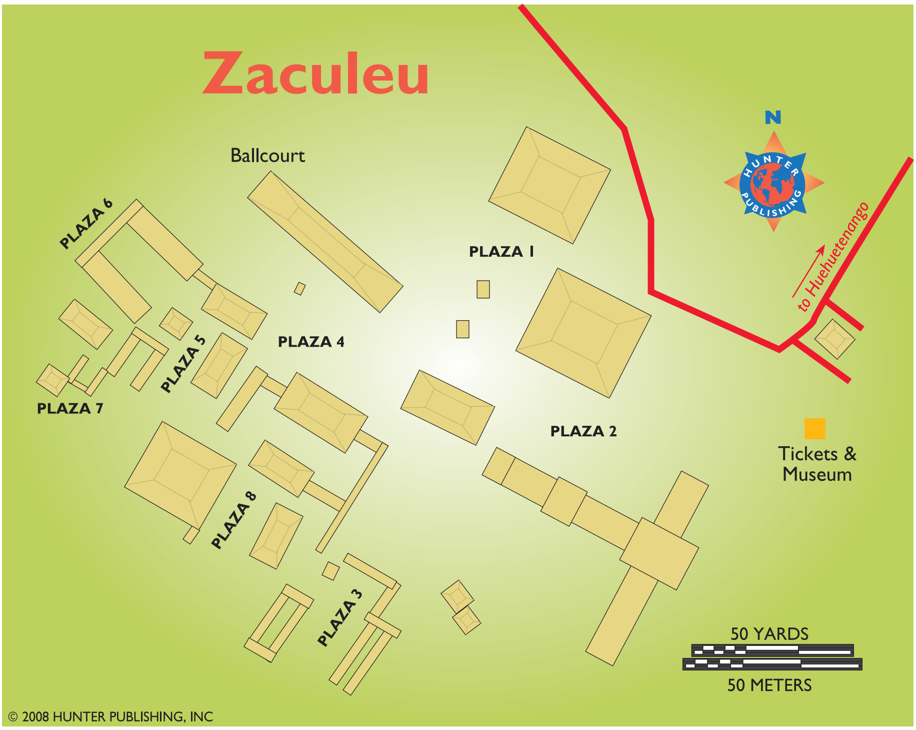
ZACULEU RUINS

These ruins are eight miles (five km) west of town. Zaculeu means "white earth" in Quiché Mayan and refers to the white limestone plaster used by the Mam on all their buildings. The Mam first settled here during the Classic period from AD 300-900. They chose the site for its natural barriers – two ravines and a river. This naturally fortified area quickly became the Mam's capital and the people developed links to Kaminal Juyu and El Tajin. Some of Zaculeu's architecture is similar to that of those two cities and points to a Toltec influence. Zaculeu soon controlled the trade routes that extended as far north as Todos Santos and along the Selegua and Cuilco valleys. Around 1250, the Mam began enhancing the ravines around the city.

History

According to the Popul Vuh book of the Quiché, Zaculeu was brought under their rule between 1400 and 1475. When Quicab, king of the Quiché, died in 1475, the Mam rose up in rebellion and demanded their freedom. But it didn't last long. The Spanish showed up in 1525, led by

Gonzalo de Alvarado, Pedro's little brother, who brought his Quiché and Cakchiquel as allies. Alvarado was looking for revenge after being told that the plot to kill him at Utalan was the work of the Mam leader Caibal Balam. Five thousand Mam warriors met 8,000 Spanish just outside the village of Malacatancito. Seeing that he was outnumbered, Caibal Balam quickly withdrew to Zaculeu and held out against the Spanish for six weeks. But the natural fortification meant they were boxed in and the Mam started to starve. Caibal tried to surrender, but Gonzalo allowed the Mam to live only if they converted to Christianity. Caibal agreed, and the captives were divided into religious congregations that eventually evolved into the various municipalities throughout the department. The city fell into disuse and became overgrown by jungle. During his epic journey of 1840, John Stephens rediscovered the ruins and wrote about them in his book, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatán*. Sylvanus Morley and Edwin Shook mapped the area in the early 1930s.



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Exploring the Ruins

The Zaculeu ruins remained untouched until 1946, when the notorious United Fruit Company decided to restore them. In typical UFC style, the ruins were reconstructed with a heavy hand and, consequently, have become the poster child for bad archeological "restorations." Several large temples, plazas and the ball court have all been slathered with thick white plaster. No roof combs, carvings, stucco or moldings were preserved. In a few places the original stone work and traces of paint can be seen. The difference is obvious. The most interesting finds were the burial sites, with bodies crammed into great urns or laid out in vaults. Alongside the bodies were pyrite plaques, carved jade, jewelry and ceramics. These items are displayed at a small on-site museum.

Close by, in Chivacabé Village, is the **Cave of the Mammoth** (*Cueva el Mamut*). Inside this cave bones of a giant mastodon were found alongside fossils dating back to the Paleo-Indian period (13000-7900 BC).

> GETTING HERE: *The ruins are only 2½ miles (four km) north of Hue-Hue and are easily accessed by bus. Ruta 3 buses leave downtown Hue-Hue from 7a Av, between Calles 3 and 4. The ruins are open daily from 8 am to 5 pm. Admission is free.*

WHERE TO STAY

Hotel Casa Blanca, *7 Av 3-41, ☎ /fax 502/7-769-0777, 5 rooms, $$*. This is the nicest hotel in town and is an unexpected surprise in an otherwise noisy and dusty downtown. The rooms are huge and have great views of the mountains, particularly those on the third floor. All rooms have private baths (with plenty of hot water), cozy beds and cable TV. There are two excellent restaurants and a fireplace, and the central courtyard has a lovely garden. Service is excellent.

HOTEL PRICE CHART

Prices are per person

$	under US $25
$$	US $26-50
$$$	US $51-85
$$$$	US $86-125
$$$$$	over US $125

Hotel Zaculeu, *5 Av 1-14, ☎ 502/7-764-1086, fax 502/7-764-1575, 38 rooms, $$*. This 1885 hotel is a landmark in the city and has the most character of all the hotels. It features colonial architecture and layout, with the rooms built around a courtyard and lovely garden filled with very old trees. Ask for a room in the older section, as the newer rooms in the back are more expensive and lack charm. All rooms have double beds, private baths with hot water and cable TV. There is an excellent laundry service and a dining room.

Hotel California, *3a Av 4-25, Zona 5, ☎ 502/7-769-0500, 40 rooms, $$*. This modern hotel looks more like an office building than a hotel, but inside it is quite pleasing. The lobby is set up like a living room and the rooms have lovely blond-wood furniture, double beds and brightly colored walls. All have private baths with plenty of hot water, cable TV and small terraces that overlook the central plaza. A dining room serves decent daily specials.

Hotel Guatemex, *south side of bus terminal, Zone 5, ☎ 502/7-769-0398, 20 rooms, $.* This pleasant three-storey hotel has lovely rooms decorated in bright colors with decent beds. The best rooms are on the third floor. The hotel is safe and the service is excellent.

Hotel Cascata, *Lote 4, 4-42 Zona 5 Colonia Alvarado, Calzada Kaibil Balam, ☎ 502/7-769-0795, www.hotelcascata.ya.st, 26 rooms, $.* This hotel is has single, double and triple rooms with private bathrooms, cable TV, hot water and room service. There's a decent restaurant, as well as an excellent Internet café on site.

Hotel San Luis de la Sierra, *2 Calle 7-00, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-764-9216, fax 502/7-764-9219, 14 rooms, $.* This is a pleasant hotel with a lovely garden entrance that leads to a polished lobby. The spacious rooms are nicely painted with bright colors and have either single or double beds, private bathrooms and cable TV. The dining room is bright and shiny; it serves good regional dishes. There is also a rooftop terrace with a spectacular view – a great place to enjoy the sunny afternoons.

Hotel Mary, *2 Calle 3-52, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-764-1618, fax 502/7-764-1618, 35 rooms, $.* This is a good budget hotel that's both clean and comfortable. The décor includes some nice homey touches, such as the throw rugs and nice bedspreads, but it's on the plain side. Rooms have private baths with limited hot water, cable TV and decent furniture. If you don't like the first room you are shown, ask to see a better one.

Todos Santos Inn, *C2 Calle, 6-74, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-764-1241, 15 rooms, $.* This is the best budget hotel in town. It's clean and the rooms have double beds, decent linens, nice towels, beside tables and reading lamps. Even though the bus terminal is close by, it's relatively quiet here.

WHERE TO EAT

Café Jardin, *4 Calle and 6 Av, Zona 1.* This bright and cheery restaurant serves good food. It's popular with locals and gets full very quickly. Café Jardin opens early for breakfast, the best meal of the day – try the pancakes and milkshakes. Lunch and dinner are beef and chicken dishes. Q10-40. No credit cards.

Las Brasas, *2 Calle 1-55, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-764-2339.* HueHue's best restaurant is this unassuming steakhouse with red checkered tablecloths and wooden interior. The house specialty is grilled steak, but other choices include Chinese and vegetarian dishes. A full meal with ample servings is Q70. No credit cards.

Hotel San Luis de la Sierra, *2 Calle 7-00, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-764-9216, fax 502/7-764-9219*. This hotel has a great breakfast with endless cups of coffee, excellent egg dishes, pancakes, pastries and fruit salads. The view is incredible. Q14-50.

Hotel Casa Blanca, *7 Av 3-41, ☎ fax 502/7-769-0777.* The two restaurants in this lovely hotel serve excellent breakfasts with fresh juice, eggs, pancakes and coffee. The lunch menu includes soup, sandwiches and burgers – all very good. For dinner, try the grilled steak or chicken. The service is excellent. Q21-70.

Las Fonda de Don Juan, *2a Calle, 5-35, no phone.* This little place, just off the central plaza, serves excellent pizza and pasta. It's clean and pleasant. Q21-45. No credit cards.

Los Pollos, *3a Calle between 5a and 6a Av, no phone.* This is Hue-Hue's 24-hour joint where you can get a huge chicken meal with salad, French fries and drink for only Q21. The burgers aren't bad either. No credit cards.

Mi Tierra, *4a Calle 6-46.* This lovely café has a covered patio where you can enjoy an excellent breakfast of eggs, bacon, pancakes, tortillas and coffee. There are even croissants. Q25.

Cafeteria Mary, *21 Calle 3-52.* Next door to Hotel Mary, this cafeteria offers good basic food at reasonable prices. The menu changes daily. There isn't much atmosphere, but the people are very nice. Q14-40. No credit cards.

VILLAGES OF HUEHUETENANGO

TODOS SANTOS CUCHUMATÁN

Located at 9,000 feet in a valley of the Cuchumatánes Mountains, this isolated village is one of the most traditional places in Guatemala. Residents speak only Mam and use the original 260-day Maya calendar. The women dress in red *huipiles* with red shawls and the men wear striped pants, shirts with beautifully embroidered collars and straw hats with bandanas. Groups of marimba players can be seen in the streets.

FEAR OF FOREIGNERS

What happened in the market of Todos Santos in April, 2000 was a tragic misunderstanding between two cultures. On April 29, a busload of 23 Japanese tourists arrived to shop at the markets. A young local woman and her elderly friend were stopped at a stall. A Japanese man responded to the woman's crying infant by placing a comforting hand on the baby. The young mother began screaming that they were trying to steal her child. The couple immediately walked away, but a mob had already formed, convinced the tourists were kidnappers looking for baby organs, or members of a Satanic cult. The mob attacked the tourists, eventually beating Saison Tetsuo Yamahiro to death. The Guatemalan bus driver tried to stop them and he too was beaten and then set on fire. Others tourists in the group were held in jail until the mayor was able to calm the locals.

A number of factors were responsible for this bizarre incident. From 1978 to 1983, the government brutalized Todos Santos with their scorched-earth policy, burning, beating and killing residents. This reaffirmed a cultural idea that foreigners brought pain and trouble, an idea that dates back to the Conquistadors. The rumors of a satanic cult had been circulated by newly converted Evangelists, who believed that Satan was among the unconverted and was hunting for children to sacrifice. The Mam had also heard of baby brokers who pressured parents into giving up their infants to be sold in the States for up to $15,000. The brokers promised parents regular visitations, even if that meant flying to the States, and enough money to live comfortably for many years. Of course, neither materialized. These rumors had been stoked by the government. Additionally, infant mortality is high among the Mam, making them extremely protective of their children.

Nineteen people were arrested over the killings but none were convicted. Today, a shrine with a white cross and flowers sits on the spot where the Japanese man and Guatemalan bus driver were killed. While things have settled down now, you should approach children with caution and respect. Put away your camera and buy postcards instead.

Todos Santos is a very picturesque town. Notice the small mud brick hut attached to each home. This is a *chuj*, a sauna-like bath heated by a wood fire where the family goes to bathe and relax. On Saturday, **market day**, the town gets colorful and busy as people come down from the mountains to sell their goods. This area is famous for its **wild horse** (*skack koy*) races on Dia de Todos Santos (All Saints Day), November 1. The race participants ride bareback from one point to another, stopping after each round to drink beer. If the rider gets too drunk to stay on his horse, a family member steps in. The winner is whoever stays longest on his horse. The race is exciting, but also really dangerous. At the day's end, almost the whole town is drunk and they pass the rest of the time dancing in the central plaza.

RESPECTFUL TRAVEL

You should exercise extreme caution when dealing with the children here. The townspeople are paranoid about their children being kidnapped and also have grown weary of people snapping their pictures. Always ask permission before snapping and be prepared to pay a small fee. **Never** photograph religious ceremonies unless you are with a guide who gives you the go ahead.

There are no telephones or ATMs in Todos Santos. Bring traveler's checks or cash. If you need to contact the outside world, there is a telegraph service in town at the Telegua office just off the central plaza. It gets extremely cold here and you will need sweaters and hats if you visit in January or February.

GETTING HERE: *Buses leave from Hue-Hue between 11:30 am and 3 pm daily, and the 2½-hour ride passes by some spectacular scenery. Buses from Todos Santos to Hue-Hue start at 6 am. Either way, the buses are packed on market day. In town, everything is within walking distance so you won't need transportation. There are no street signs in the village and all directions are given according to distance from the central plaza. It's pretty hard to get lost here.*

For information and connections for local guides, check in at the **Restaurant Cuchumatán**, which acts as the unofficial tourist center.

LANGUAGE COURSES

The two major language schools in Todos Santos teach Spanish and Mam. Both schools charge the same prices and offer 20 hours of one-on-one teaching. Both schools also offer hiking tours of the surrounding area, as well as accommodations with local families. The cost is US $100-125 per week, per person. Schools don't have telephones, so you will have to contact them either by mail or by just showing up in person.

Proyecto Linguístico Español/Mam, Todos Santos Cuchumatán, 13015, Huehuetenangoz. This school is an umbrella school of La Hermandad Educativa, which also has schools in Quetzaltenango. Tuition is $115/week year-round and includes includes classes, study materials, medical consultation, room and board, and daily events. Upon request, a written examination can be provided that may be used for university credit. The school welcomes families.

Escuela Nuevo Amanecer, Todos Santos Cuchumatán 13015, Huehuetenango, Attn: Prof. Benito Ramirez, escuela_linguistica@yahoo.com. This school has regular language classes and also offers workshops run by various leaders in the community. Topics range from Maya spirituality to politics. Weaving classes are also offered.

TUJ XIOLEC/LA TORRE MOUNTAIN TREK

Tuj Xiolec is a Maya ruin still used by local shamans for religious rituals as a ceremonial site. A huge cave on the site has many interesting formations. The trek takes about 1½ hours to complete; it runs along a trail covered with huge rocks. This is a very strenuous climb and you should hire a guide. It starts three miles outside of town and leads to the cave Tuj Xiolec.

La Torre, the highest mountain peak in Central America, is only six miles (10 km) out of town. The trail climbs to 13,123 feet (4,000 meters) and follows along the mountain ridges with views of the valley and lush forests below. Five streams cross through this area. You encounter two of them, which must be crossed via hanging bridges. From the top of La Torre, you can see five volcanoes, the valley of Huehuetenango and across into Mexico.

GETTING HERE: *There are many trails leading from Todos Santos and none of them are marked, making it very easy to get lost. The simplest way to explore this area is to join one of the language school groups when they do their weekly hikes. It costs a mere Q10 and you will have a guide who knows the area. Ask in town for schedules.*

WHERE TO STAY

Accommodations are quite basic and you will probably crave a hot shower by the time you leave. Credit cards are not accepted at any of the hotels.

TIP: Carry your own sleeping bag, as some of the linens are rather paltry. When you get tired of lukewarm showers at your hotel, arrange for a *chaj* sauna. This is a pleasant way to get clean.

Hospedaje Casa Familiar, *left off the main road and follow the sign, 8 rooms (6 dorm style), $.* This is the nicest hotel in town, but that doesn't mean it's luxurious. It means the beds have linen on them, the doors lock and the rooms are clean. The shared bathrooms have a limited supply of hot water. On the plus side, the views are incredible and the family that owns the hotel is very kind and will show you their weaving workshop.

Hotel Mam, *left off the main street, 6 rooms, $.* The rooms here are quite large and are furnished with two single beds and a table. Some have a terrace that overlooks the central plaza. Bathrooms are shared and sometimes have hot water.

Hotelito Todos Santos, *beside Hotel Mam, look for the big sign, 5 rooms, $.* This hotel looks like a nice concrete house and is actually someone's home. The rooms are pleasant, clean and have good linens and blankets. Hotelito Todos Santos has the best views in town, which makes up for the really lousy showers.

Hospedaje El Viajero, *turn right at Hotelito Todos Santos, 5 rooms, $.* This hotel is tucked away off the street so it's very quiet. The views are decent. Large rooms are rather empty and the linens rather thin, but the shower is very good, with lots of hot water.

WHERE TO EAT

Food is pretty basic in Todos Santos so don't expect anything fancy. The restaurants are clean, at least. None of them have phones. No credit cards accepted.

Comedor Katy is set on a corner of the plaza. It serves tasty meals of fresh vegetable soup, chicken, beans and rice for Q15.

Nuevo Amanecer runs a women's bakery collective that sells bread and pastries on Thursday mornings at the local language school.

Proyecto Linguístico Español offers a delicious meal of typical regional food at their school every Friday. Q15.

Restaurant Tzolkin/Café Ixcanac, just off the central plaza, offers hamburgers, hot dogs and sandwiches. Q15-35.

Restaurant Cuchumajlaán is on the main road into town and it's the only bar. It serves pizza, hot sandwiches, French fries and burgers. Q10-50. It also acts as the local information center and can recommend guides for treks.

SAN PEDRO SOLOMA

Soloma is one of the busiest villages in the northern Cuchumatánes, with a population of just over 3,000. It's located on what used to be the bed of a lake, so the area is quite lush and still suffers from landslides during the rainy season. The women wear long white *huipiles* similar to those worn by the Lacandón Maya in Mexico. Market days are Thursday and Sunday and are the best days to visit, when the town is filled with locals from the outlying villages selling their wares.

SIGHTSEEING

Pajaj waterfalls

There are several **waterfalls** to visit in this area. South of Soloma, close to the apple orchards of San Juan Ixcoy, are **Pepajaú Waterfalls**. These are area's largest falls, with a 820-foot (250-meter) drop. Walk the rugged two-hour trail that follows the mountain ridge to the falls. It crosses many rivers via hanging bridges and offers amazing scenery along the way. The highlight is the waterfall thundering down the mountain. Camping is permitted, but you must first ask permission from the locals before pitching your tent.

Close to town are the much smaller **Pajaj waterfalls**, measuring 98 feet (30 meters). Although not as spectacular, these falls are still worth seeing. The trail is not as difficult to follow and the hike is much shorter, taking about an hour. There is excellent birding along this trail. Close by is the Bacau Maya ceremonial center where, every Thursday, the local shamans gather to perform religious rituals and pray to the gods. Leave your camera behind and just watch this one.

GETTING HERE: *There is regular bus service from Hue-Hue to San Pedro Soloma; buses leave every 20 minutes. You can also catch a bus from Todos Santos, but not on a regular basis. To get to the larger Pepajaú Waterfalls you must reach the village of San Lucas Quisil, just north of San Juan Ixcoy. Ask the driver to let you off at the junction and you'll see a well-marked sign. The Pajaj Waterfalls are easier to reach. Catch a local bus going in that direction (just ask) or simply hike the 2½ miles (four km) from San Juan Ixcoy along a very scenic route. You may also consider hitching a ride or hiring one of the local pickup trucks to bring you there and back for around Q35.*

Santa Eulalia is 20 minutes north of Soloma in a part of the Cuchumatánes that is extremely windy and cold. Sheep farming is the main industry here and men wear a *capixay*, a type of woolen poncho, as they work in the fields or round up the sheep. The area is well known for its *marimbas*. The marimba is Guatemala's national instrument, a single keyboard made with the wood of the hormigo tree. It closely resembles a xylophone though it has much deeper tones. Santa Eulalia is considered the marimba capital of Guatemala and produces some of the finest instruments, famed for their lovely shades of yellow, black and dark orange wood. The family workshops and factories in Eulalia welcome visitors, but there is no set schedule for tours. You just have to show up.

GETTING HERE: *Buses run from Hue-Hue en route to San Mateo. The road is pretty bad and the going slow as you pass up one side of the mountain range and down the other. Depending on the weather, it can take up to six hours. You should leave very early and, even then, probably won't make it back to Hue-Hue in one day. Plan to stay over in San Pedro Soloma or go on to Todos Santos.*

GUIDED TOURS

This is rugged country and you should hire a guide to accompany you on the trails. Contact the local **tourist office** in San Pedro Soloma, just off the square, ☎ 502/7-780-6101, for help arranging a guide. You will need to speak some Spanish and be patient – things are just getting organized for tourists.

WHERE TO STAY & EAT

There isn't much to choose from in San Pedro Soloma. Try the **Río Lindo**, a decent budget hotel that offers one daily meal. *6 rooms, $.* Just off the central plaza.

You can also ask around town to see if any locals will rent out a room in their house. There are usually a few. Also check with the tourist office at the central plaza.

SAN MATEO DE IXATAN

The rustic and extremely scenic village of San Mateo de Ixatan is 8,520 feet (2,600 meters) above sea level on a point overlooking the valley. It is often shrouded in mist and can be very cold at night, especially inside the wooden houses with tiled roofs that perch on the exposed hillside. The Maya here speak **Chuj**, a dialect spoken in only a few villages in the north. The women wear long white gowns embroidered with reds, yellows and blues that feature a star in the center. Men wear *capixay* embroidered with flowers and images of the quetzal bird. Their clothing is part of their worship of Father Earth and Mother Moon. Traditional *huipiles* from here are so beautiful that they are becoming collector's items. San Mateo is about three hours by bus from Hue-Hue.

SIGHTSEEING

San Mateo has a beautiful colonial **church** dating back to the 1600s. The entire building has been painted red, including the saints. Inside you'll see candles and burning incense left by residents as offerings to Maya gods. The easiest days to visit are Thursday and Sunday, market days, when there are plenty of buses from Hue-Hue.

Next to the village is an old **salt mine** originally opened by the Mam in the Classic period (AD 300-900). The black salt is thought to have medicinal properties. The salt mines are open from 1-4 pm. Admission is free. If you have time you can hike to the unrestored ruins of **Yolchunab** and **Lachepa**.

> GETTING HERE: *You can catch a bus from San Pedro Soloma. The village is a short distance from that town as the crow flies, but your journey will take a few hours as you go up and down several large mountains. This journey is not for the faint of heart, the impatient or those with a weak stomach. Get to the bus early to ensure you have a seat; the chicken bus fills up fast. Plan to spend the night either here or in Soloma.*

WHERE TO STAY & EAT

Bring your sleeping bag because rooms don't come with sheets or towels. Ask in the central plaza at the **Municipal Office**, ☎ 502/7-764-0323, to be put in touch with any local families who might be willing to rent out a room.

El Aguila, the most recognized pension in town, has basic rooms. The owners run a *comedore* where you can grab a bite to eat.

Department of San Marcos

San Marcos is a remote rural area known for its sugar, maize, beans, wheat, barley, rice, bananas, cane, cacao and cattle ranches. Furniture, cotton and wool are also produced in this area. With the notable exception of Tajumulco Volcano, there are few tourist attractions in this department and, consequently, no tourist services. If you want to visit the volcano, it's best to book a trip with a tour company such as **Quetzaltrekkers**, Casa Argentina, diagonal 12, 8-37, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-761-5865, www.quetzaltrekkers.com.

TECÚN UMÁN

If you are coming from or going to any of the southern states in Mexico (such as Oaxaca or southern Chiapas), you will probably pass through the border town of Tecún Umán. Like most border towns, it's not particularly pleasant and parts of the city are unsafe. The smartest plan is to be at the border early and catch the first bus out of town. Several bus companies offer direct rides from Mexico to Guatemala City.

Shuttles from Antigua to Mexico

Monarca Travel, 6a Av Norte #6-A, ☎/fax 502/7-832-4305, monarcas@conexion.com.gt. This company also offers shuttle service from San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico to Antigua Guatemala. Tickets start at $40 per person and include help with border crossings.

Sin Fronteras, 5a Av Norte#15A, ☎ 502/7-832-1017, fax 502/7-832-8453, www.sinfront.com, offers a special bus pass to and from Mexico for up to 14 days starting at $94.

Public Buses from Guatemala City to the Mexican Border

Public buses leave regularly from the Mexican border in Tecun Umán, San Marcos, to Guatemala. The bus companies Galgos, Fortalezas, Rapidos del Sur, Rutas Lima, Transportes Marquensita all have buses leaving on the hour.

Buses from Chiapas, Mexico to La Mesilla, Huehuetenango

UNO, ☎ 52/51-55-533-2424 or toll-free throughout Mexico 800/702-8000, www.uno.com.mx.

Colon Cristobal, toll-free in Mexico ☎ 800/849-6136, www.cristobalcolon.com.mx.

ADO, ☎ 51-55-533-2424 or toll-free in Mexico, 800/702-8000, www.ado.com.mx.

Prices will vary according to the bus line, but tickets usually start at around $30 to get to the border. Your seat is guaranteed when you buy a ticket and reservations can be made online.

Watch out at the border for the sleazy border help. If you get stuck for whatever reason, get to **Hotel Don José**, Calle Real del Comercio, ☎ 502/7-776-8164. This semi-decent hotel has 18 rooms and is, at least, safe. Don't go out wandering at night in this city.

Northern Highlands

The Northern Highlands, also known as **Los Altiplanos**, consist of three departments: **Quiché**, **Alta Verapaz** and **Baja Verapaz**. This is an area of immense beauty and isolation inhabited by traditional Cakchiquel, Achi' Q'eqchí and Pokomam Maya. It also features the world-renowned market at Chichicastenango.

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Department of Quiché

The department of Quiché shares a northern border with Mexico, an eastern border with Alta and Baja Verapaces, a southern border with Chimaltenango and a western border with Totonicapán and Huehuetenango. The most visited place in this department is the village of **Chichicastenango**, but there are also some incredible areas to explore farther north where **Sierra de Chuacús** mountain range joins the Cuchumatánes mountains and gives way to the virgin rainforests of the **Ixcán**.

HISTORY

This department is named after the greatest of the Maya tribes, the **Quiché**. From their capital city of **Utatlán**, the Quiché were a powerful force that controlled most of the highlands and ruled over many other tribes. At first, the Quiché were able to stop the advance of the Conquistadors, but were defeated when **Avlarado** made alliances with the other tribes that had been under their rule. The remoteness of the area soon proved to be too much for the Spanish, who left shortly after the conquest realizing there was little for them to plunder. Quiché was left on its own until the 1800s, when large-scale commercial farms began visiting the area to recruit workers. Quiché became a source of cheap labor and the Quiché Maya were virtual slaves working in harsh conditions for very little money. This went on for 200 years until the population was so fed up they eagerly supported the rebels in the civil war. The region suffered for this support.

Today, Quiché is primarily rural, producing corn, beans, wheat, potatoes and, on a lesser scale, coffee, sugar, rice and tobacco. It is famous for its cotton and wool textiles, pottery, weaving and fireworks.

CHICHICASTENANGO

Chichicastenango is a Nahuatl word meaning, “place of the nettles.” Today, a more apt description would be “place of the bargains.” Chichi (as locals call it) has one of the most famous markets in the world. It attracts all the Indian weavers from across the highlands and from other parts to sell their wares in the market. Its close proximity to Guatemala City, Antigua and Panajachel make it a favorite day-trip for tourists. Af-

© Shelagh McNally

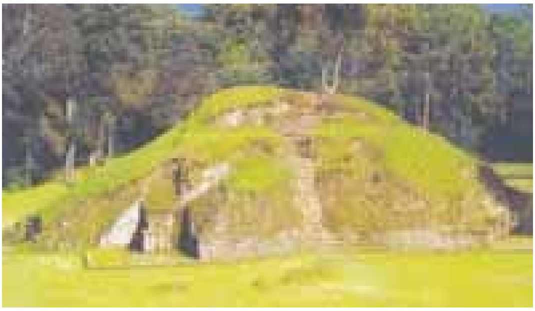
Fabrics at Chichi market

ter Tikal and Antigua, Chichicastenango is the most visited place in Guatemala.

But Chichi is more than just a market. It is also the cultural and religious center for the local highland Maya, with a parallel Indian and *Ladino* government. Important religious shrines here are still used by the Maya in their ceremonies.

> GETTING HERE: *Dozens of shuttles serve Chichi from Guatemala City, Antigua and Panajachel. There are also five major bus companies with regularly scheduled service, but the routes are not as direct. Riding the chicken bus is a harrowing experience because of the sheer volume of people and the hairpin curves on this mountainous road often taken at breakneck speeds. Shuttles are comfortable and cost just a little more (the average ticket runs US $9-18).*
>
> *Most people come just for the day, arriving early in the morning and leaving by late afternoon. This may be too rushed if you want to explore the area farther. Chichi has a number of good hotels and restaurants.*

HISTORY



Temple 3, Iximché ruins

The **Cakchiquel Maya** first settled the area and established a market in AD 1200. But they left in 1470 after repeated skirmishes with the Quiché, settling nearby in their capital of **Iximché**, where they mounted campaign after campaign against the Quiché. The Quiché finally abandoned the area in favor of their capital K'umarcaaj, later known as Utatlán. In 1524, the **Spanish** built up Chichi as a refuge city for the survivors of Utatlán after it was burned down by Alvarado. The Conquistadors left shortly afterwards. The priests left in charge were very tolerant toward the Quiché, allowing them to keep their religion and gods and combining them with Catholicism. Some of the rituals are still used today. During the 1800s the church also protected many of the residents from inscription into the slave labor camps. Unfortunately, the protection didn't last long enough and the area suffered during the civil war.

SIGHTSEEING

The big **market** is held on Sunday, and there's a smaller one on Thursday. Streets are lined with stalls and packed with people. The selection is endless. Be prepared to wade through a lot of trashy tourist stuff before getting to the gold. Tourist-oriented stalls usually sell masks, embroidered cloth, clothing, tablecloths and tapestries. Be aware that all prices are inflated and you must barter in order to get even a fair deal.

BARGAINING SAVVY

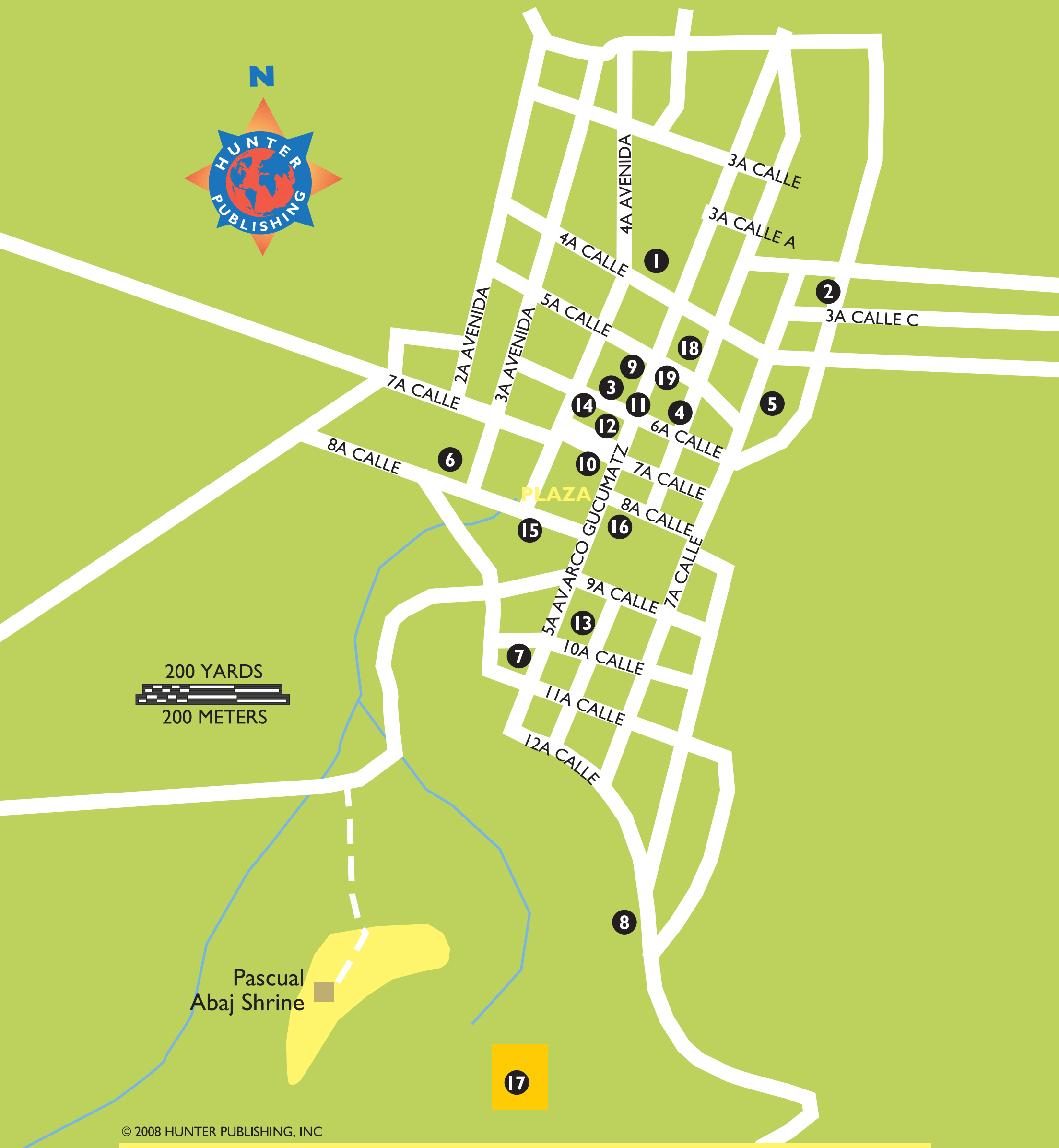
Don't touch anything until you are ready to haggle. Touching denotes you are interested in buying and will start the bartering process. The best time to get bargains is in the morning before 10 am (when the tour buses arrive) and after 4 pm (when the buses have left).

WARNING: Watch your belongings in the market. Pickpockets love this place and are very good at what they do. Bring the money you plan to spend and leave the rest, along with your documents, in a safe place.

Iglesias de Santo Tomás. This lovely whitewashed church on the central plaza was built in 1540 on the site of a Maya altar. It has been rebuilt and restored several times, and much of the original structure remains. Maya Indians began worshipping here in earnest from 1701 to 1703, when Friar Francisco Ximenez began using their bible, the Popul Vuh, as the church text. This book is the most famous piece of Maya literature (see page 82) and outlines the cosmology and myths of the Quiché. It is one of the only remaining written works; most were burned by zealous monks. Ximenez made a copy of the Popul Vuh. The copy now

Iglesias de Santo Tomás

Chichicastenango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WHERE TO STAY

1. Posada El Arco
2. Chalet Hotel
3. Hotel/Restaurante Girón
4. Hotel Chugüilá
5. Hotel Santo Tomás
6. Mayan Inn
7. Hospedaje Salvador
8. Hotel Villa Grande

WHERE TO EAT

9. Restaurante Tapena
10. La Villa de Los Cofrades #1
11. La Villa de Los Cofrades #2
12. Restaurant La Fonda del Tzijolaj
13. Restaurant La Parrilla
14. Restaurante Tziguan

● SIGHTS & BUS STOPS

15. Museo Regional Rossbach
16. Iglesia de Santo Tomás
17. Market Area
18. Buses to Santa Cruz del Quiché & Nebaj
19. Buses to Guatemala City, Panajachel, Interamerica

resides in the Newberry Library of Chicago and the original has been lost.

Santo Tomás is still a place of worship for the Quiché, so be extremely respectful when visiting. Put away your camera and don't walk up the steps of the church, which are considered sacred. The are usually being blessed by one of the elders. Everyone must ask permission to enter, usually done by burning copal incense. Gringos must use the side door to enter.

Inside, the faithful worship on their knees in front of candles offered to their ancestors and various saints. Each saint has their place in the church, and you will see the Maya gods alongside Catholic saints. Different sections of the church are devoted to specific blessings. There is one area for children, another for marriage, etc.

> **TIP:** Don't try to sneak any photos or you will be tossed out on your ear. Stay quiet. This is the only church in Chichi that permits foreigners.

Rossbach Museum Regional Museum. This is just outside of town. Ildefonso Rossbach was a Franciscan priest who served in Chichi from 1894 until 1944. This museum houses his collection of pre-Colombian jade and copper jewelry, along with obsidian spearheads and arrowheads found in the area. The collection also includes clay figurines, ancient pots and ceramic pieces dating as far back as 1200 BC: Rossbach received many of these articles as gifts from the local Quiché families he helped over the years. Open 8 am to noon and 2 to 5 pm daily, except Tuesdays.

Shrine of Pascual Abaj. The Pascual Abaj, or Sacrifice Stone, is a shrine to the Maya earth god and it draws many Maya, who come to worship and give offerings. Should you be at the shrine during one of their rituals, keep a respectful distance and put away your camera. The shrine is actually several small altars surrounding a pre-Columbian sculpture of a man's face. It is similar to the Olmec heads in Mexico, only much smaller. Time and weather have worn down the features. In 1957, newly baptized Catholics smashed the statue, but it was rebuilt by locals using the old pieces reinforced with cement and steel. In 1999, a visiting museum tried to move the statue in order to examine it more closely. They managed to snap off the nose and have not yet repaired the damage. Still, the Quiché continue to gather here and worship with offerings of flowers, incense and alcohol.

STEPPING SAFELY

Don't visit this shrine on your own. It's in a deserted location where numerous tourists have been robbed. Even the locals will warn you not to go. The safest way to visit is in a group with a hired guide. You won't have any trouble finding someone to take you;

there is an enclave of village lads all eager to show you the way. You should tip them Q5 for their efforts.

WHERE TO STAY

The town tends to fill up in anticipation of the market, so either have a reservation or come early to get a room on Wednesdays and Saturdays. The rest of the week you will have no problem getting a room.

BEWARE: Ignore the local children who tell you that your hotel of choice is closed. It's a ruse to get you to a hotel that pays them a kickback fee for bringing you in.

Mayan Inn, *3 Av at 8 Calle, ☎ 502/7-756-1179, www.mayaninn.com.gt, 30 rooms, $$$$.* Built in 1932 by the Clark family of Clark Tours, this hotel oozes class and style. The original building is genuine adobe complete with the original woodwork. The other buildings are restored colonial houses. Rooms have fireplaces, antique furniture (including carved headboards and side tables), private baths and colorful decorative art as accents. All look out onto the beautifully maintained flower gardens or the hills beyond. Meals are in a majestic dining room with a fireplace; the menu changes daily. The service here is first-class.

HOTEL PRICE CHART

Prices are per person

$	under US $25
$$	US $26-50
$$$	US $51-85
$$$$	US $86-125
$$$$$	over US $125

Hotel Santo Tomás, *7 Av 5-32, ☎ 502/7-756-1316, fax 502/7-756-1306, 43 rooms, $$$.* Combining colonial architecture with modern conveniences, this hotel is popular with tourists. Outdoor passageways lead from the bedrooms to a beautiful courtyard filled with flowers and fountains. Rooms are large and decorated with local textiles and wooden furniture. Back rooms have views of the country, while the front rooms look out onto town. There's a pool, gym, hot tub, sauna and restaurant.

Hotel Villa Grande, *Canton Pachoj Alto, Km 144 on road to Antigua, ☎ 502/7-756-1053, fax 502/7-756-1140, 67 rooms, $$$.* It's large, it's luxurious and it's bland. What a shame the buildings are so ugly because the view is incredible. Guest rooms are painted peach and beds have embroidered spreads made locally. The more spacious rooms have fireplaces.

There is a restaurant, pool, hot tub and bar. The hotel can arrange a shuttle to town.

Hotel Chugüila, *5 Av 5-24* ☎ *502/7-756-1134, fax 7-756-1279, 31 rooms, $$.* This is a pleasant hotel with good rates. Rooms are furnished with a wooden table and chairs and are centered around a cobblestone courtyard that also acts as the parking lot. The more expensive rooms have fireplaces. The dining room is the hotel's best feature; you can look out at the courtyard or watch all the action on the main street. The restaurant serves hamburgers, pasta, pizza and sandwiches.

Hotel Chalet, *3 Calle C 7-44,* ☎ *502/7-756-1360, 7 rooms, $$.* A friendly couple runs this cozy little hotel on a quiet side street. It has cheery yellow walls decorated with masks and Guatemalan handicrafts. The rooms are tidy and have nice bathrooms. Breakfasts are quite pleasant, with a good menu, amiable service and a great atmosphere.

Hospedaje Salvador, *10 Calle at 5 Av,* ☎ *502/7-756-1329, 46 rooms, $.* This hodgepodge of a hotel has lots of character. Rooms are tucked away in nooks and crannies that you find hidden along passages and staircases. These walkways all seem to lead to the main courtyard, which displays a giant statue of the Virgin Mary alongside a Maya god. Potted plants are the main décor. Rooms are basic and clean, but the beds are soft. No credit cards.

Hotel Casa de Huespedes Girón, *6a Calle 4-52,* ☎ *502/7-756-1156. 19 rooms, $.* This is a clean hotel with simple rooms that have hard beds and shared baths with cold water. The more "luxurious" rooms have their own bath and hot water. Rooms are centered around the courtyard, which is also a car park. No credit cards.

Posada El Arco, *4 Calle 4-36,* ☎ *502/7-756-1255, 7 rooms, $.* The best of the budget hotels in Chichi, Posada El Arco has 1950s décor that creates a homey ambience. Spacious rooms have wood-frame beds, fireplaces and bathrooms with lots of hot water. There is a laundry service. This place fills up fast, so arrive early. No credit cards.

WHERE TO EAT

On market days a number of excellent ***comedores*** set up in the market area. The rest of the week, try the *comedores* by the post office. The two posh hotels, **Maya Inn** and **Hotel Santo Thomàs** (above), have restaurants that have great décor but only so-so food. They are usually packed with tour groups.

© Shelagh McNally

Food for sale in the market

La Villa de los Cofrades #1 y #2. This is actually two sister restaurants. The smaller café is located on the central plaza near Centro Commercial. Terrific breakfasts with great coffee and delicious waffles are served on a small patio where you can watch all the action. The other restaurant, located at the corner of 6a Calle and 5a Av, is on the second floor and is more tranquil. The lunch and dinner menus are the same at both places and consist of fish, chicken, and beef. A few vegetarian dishes are offered. The service is slow here. Q16-48. No credit cards.

La Fonda el Tzijolaj, *Centro Commercial, north side,* ☎ *502/7-756-1013.* Located on the second floor, this restaurant overlooks the market and is a great place to watch the whole thing unfold. It serves traditional Guatemalan meals along with pizza and pasta (which is really excellent). Prices are low and the meals come with soup, salad and a drink. Q24-48. No credit cards.

Restaurante Tziguan Tinamit, *6 Calle and 5a Av* Tziguan Tinamit is the Quiché name for Chichicastenango. Since this eatery is located right in the middle of the market, it's popular with tour groups. The fare is uninspiring – pizza, pastas, hamburgers, French fries and the occasional decent soup. The waitstaff, however, is charming and the beer prices low. Q32-56.

Restaurante Tapena, *5a Av.* Hungry and on a budget? Come to this place for its hearty chicken or beef dishes accompanied by soup, salad, rice, beans and coffee. The family who runs the restaurant is jovial and helpful. Q10-20. No credit cards.

Restaurant La Parrilla, *5a Av and 10a Calle.* This is the place for carnivores in search of a great grilled steak at good prices. All cuts are offered and grilled to perfection. Soups, salads, rice and beans accompany every meal. Q24-48. No credit cards.

SANTA CRUZ DEL QUICHÉ

The capital of the department, this city is often referred to as El Quiché. There isn't much to see in this commercial center, but it does serve as a transfer point for traveling farther north into the Ixil Triangle. Few tourists make it up this far and locals are really friendly and welcoming.

UTATLÁN RUINS

These unexcavated ruins are also known by their Quiché name – K'umarcaaj – the stronghold of the Quiché Maya until the Spanish Conquistadors overtook the city. The area is lovely.

HISTORY

The city of K'umarcaaj was built by **King Gucumatz** in AD 1400. He began conquering neighboring cities as far east as Huehuetenango and west to Cobán. K'umarcaaj quickly became the dominant city, developing close ties with its southern equivalent, Quetzaltenango (Xela). It is mentioned in the Popul Vuh and is thought to be the city where that great work of Maya literature was written. After **Pedro de Alvarado** defeated the great king Tecúm Umàn at Xela, he was invited to K'umarcaaj to sign a peace treaty with the elders. Alvarado believed they were plotting to kill him so he arrived with his allies, the **Cakchiquel Maya** who, after being ruled by the Quiché for 200 years, were itching for revenge. Alvarado and his buddies captured the leaders and burned them alive on March 7, 1524. Then Alvarado burned the city to the ground, renamed it Utatlán and moved the survivors to Chichicastenango.

EXPLORING THE RUINS

The city was never rebuilt after its destruction and the ruins have not been restored. However, you can still see 10 identifiable structures, including the Great Plaza, a ball court and the bases of several pyramids. Utatlán is still a place of worship for the Maya. Under the main plaza is a manmade cave where local shamans perform religious ceremonies. You should respect the area and not take any pictures or enter the cave.

GETTING HERE: *The ruins are only two miles west of Santa Cruz. You can either walk or take a taxi.*

WHERE TO STAY

There are several large hotels in Santa Cruz. They tend to be geared toward locals rather than tourists, so you'll find few luxuries. Prices are made to match, with the most expensive hotel in town running US $6. Hotel restaurants serve simple but good food. No credit cards are accepted.

Hotel Maya Quiché, *3 Av 4-19, Zona 1A, ☎ 502/7-755-1464, 14 rooms, $.* This hotel is just off from the central plaza and has large clean rooms , some with private baths. 14 rooms. $.

Hotel Rey K'i'ch'e, *8a Calle 0-39, Zona 5, ☎ 502/7-775-0827, 22 rooms, $.* Located close to the bus terminal, this hotel is clean and fairly modern. Rooms are tidy and each has a double bed and dresser. You have the option of a shared or private bath. Rooms with private baths also have a color TV. There's a good restaurant.

Hotel San Pascual, *7a Calle 0-43, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-755-1107, 33 rooms, $.* This friendly hotel is located next to the church. The rooms are homey and well furnished and have private baths with lots of hot water. There is a really nice living room, where guests gather in the evening to watch TV and chat.

WHERE TO EAT

Comedor Fliper, *1a Av around the corner from Hotel San Pascual.* You can get simple meals in this plain but clean café. Enjoy chicken sandwiches, rice and beans, hamburgers, soups and dinners of roast chicken. US $2-5. No credit cards.

Restaurante El Torito Steak House, *4a Calle, west of central plaza.* This is the biggest and best restaurant in town. It serves a mean filet mignon, as well as hamburgers, sandwiches and strange combination dishes that pass for salads. Dinners come with soup, salad, rice, beans and a coffee. It doesn't offer much in the way of décor. US $4-7. No credit cards.

THE IXIL TRIANGLE

Three villages in northern Quiché make up the Ixil Triangle. **Nebaj**, **San Juan Cotzal** and **Chajul** are home to the **Ixil Maya**. This is the most remote and traditional part of Guatemala in the Cuchumatánes Mountains. Few tourists travel here, although it offers some of the most spectacular scenery in the country, along with some genuine and colorful Maya communities.

HISTORY

The **Ixil** have always been isolated. Initial excavations of ruins here show they developed independently of the other Maya groups. During the Postclassic period (900-1500) the **Quiché** ruled them long-distance. Initially, **Spanish** invasion into the Ixil region was severe. However, the Spanish found the **Cuchumatánes**, the Maya people who lived in these mountains, too inhospitable and let the area fall into neglect. By 1750, the population had recovered from the Conquistadors and Catholic priests visited on a regular basis, although they did not have many converts. The Ixil region remained isolated until 1890, when many were forced into working on coffee plantations by a new law called the **Regulation of Day Laborers**. By law, all Indians were obliged to put in four years of labor on a coffee plantation. At the end of the four years, many were so far in debt to the patron of the plantation they were forced to stay on. This draconian law was finally revoked in 1934 and the Ixil returned home. Conditions improved slowly, and then the civil war struck.

Because the area was so remote, the leftist army, **Ejército Guerillero de los Pobres** (Guerilla Army of the Poor), or EGP, set up their base here. The Guatemalan Army soon followed and branded many of the Ixil as communists purely because they lived in the same area. The army began its notorious scorched-earth policy here. They burnt down all the villages, except those used for their bases. Over 200,000 people were killed or displaced. The government built some “model” villages – glorified refugee camps – into which they moved the survivors.

Since the 1996 Peace Accord the area has settled down and people are slowly starting to return and rebuild their communities.

NEBAJ

Nebaj (www.nebaj.com) is the largest village in the Ixil region. It’s pretty, with white adobe buildings and cobbled streets. Horses are still used.

© www.nebaj.com

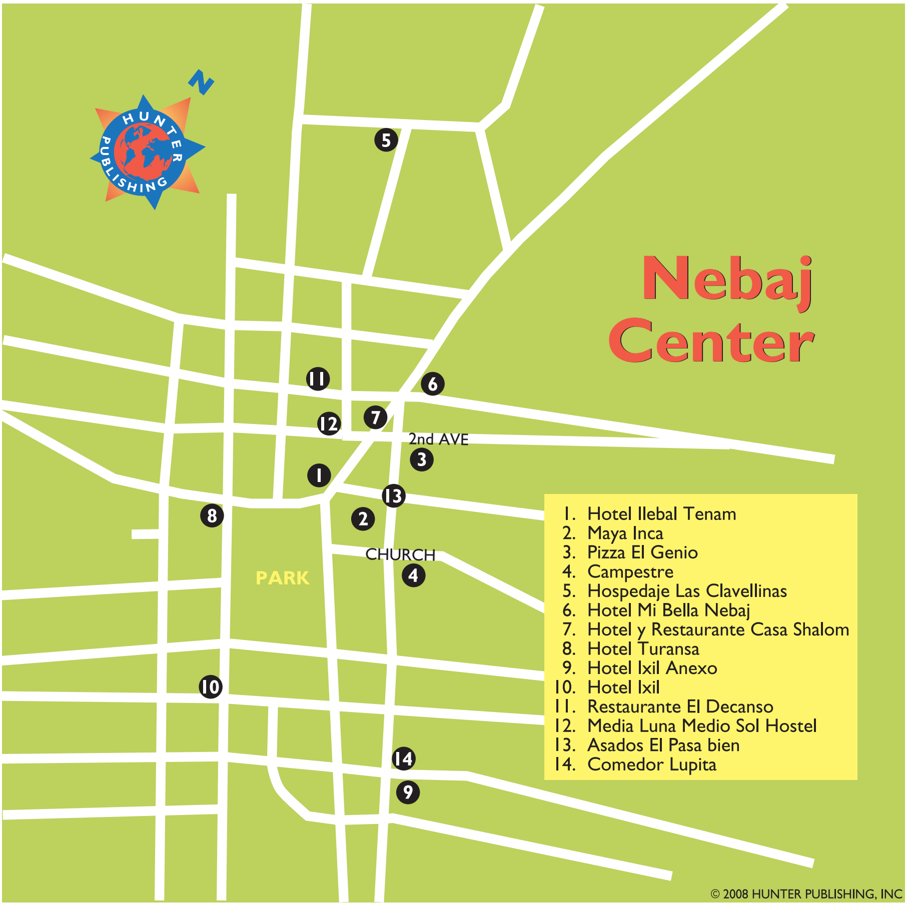
Nebaj weaver

The town features a very nice **church** that dates back to the colonial period. The **weaving** of Nebaj is quite intricate and has a complex geometric pattern of purples, red, yellows, greens and oranges. Women wear stunning green *huipiles*, put their hair up with green ribbons and wear green shawls. The men no longer dress in traditional clothes, although they still sport huge cowboy hats that make their bodies appear tiny. An excellent shop on the central square sells their weaving.

A locals' **market** takes place every Thursday and Sunday. Nebaj is the jumping-off point for Ixil Trekking (see page 247).

> GETTING HERE: *Nebaj is easily accessed by bus from Santa Cruz del Quiché. Buses leave every 1½ hours. Buses also come from Huehuetenango, although the road is much rougher and the trip longer. There are no street signs in Nebaj, so ask local children to help you navigate. They will expect a small tip. One or two quetzals will do.*

Just off the plaza you'll find the Municipal Office for **Eco-tourism**. It's in the same building as the **Aristan Market**, which sells weavings created by local women. The eco-tourism office can help organize trekking expeditions and has maps of the area. You may also want to visit the **Trekking Ixil** office, 3a Calle, Zone 1, ☎ 502/5-418-3940, to arrange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1. Hotel Ilebal Tenam
2. Maya Inca
3. Pizza El Genio
4. Campestre
5. Hospedaje Las Clavellinas
6. Hotel Mi Bella Nebaj
7. Hotel y Restaurante Casa Shalom
8. Hotel Turansa
9. Hotel Ixil Anexo
10. Hotel Ixil
11. Restaurante El Decanso
12. Media Luna Medio Sol Hostel
13. Asados El Pasa bien
14. Comedor Lupita

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for guides and day-trips. All profits from the trips are put toward the community.

While you are here, consider hiking up to **Las Cataracts**, a series of lovely freshwater waterfalls close to town. Even though you don't need a guide for this tour, consider hiring a young local anyway. A guide will take you to visit some of the sacred sites of the *costumbristas*, a pre-Christian group who still celebrate Maya rituals, as well as to the smaller villages along the way. The tour concludes at the largest waterfall, which is 82 feet (25 meters) high.

WHERE TO STAY

There isn't much in the way of luxury accommodations, but the hotels are simple and charming. Credit cards are not accepted.

HOTEL PRICE CHART

Prices are per person

$	under US $25
$$	US $26-50
$$$	US $51-85
$$$$	US $86-125
$$$$$	over US $125

MediaLuna MedioSol, *half a block from El Descanso Restaurant, ☎ 502/5-311-9100, www.nebaj.com/hostel.htm, $$.* This hostel is quite luxurious, considering its remote location. Dormitory rooms are clean and comfortable. There is also a kitchenette, lounge with TV, a Maya sauna and wireless Internet access.

Hallway, MediaLuna MedioSol

Hotel y Restaurante Casa Shalom, *Canton Batzbacam, ☎ 502/7-755-1017, 8 rooms, $.* A nice modern hotel in the middle of town with large, bright and cheery rooms. There is hot water and a good restaurant serving beef, chicken, soups and sandwiches.

Hotel Ilebal Tenam, *Calzada 15 de septiembre, ☎ 502/7-755-8039, fax 502/7-755-8306, www.sleeprentbuy.com/ilebal%20tenam/index.htm, 7 rooms, $.* This comfortable small hotel has medium-sized rooms with private bathrooms centered around a courtyard with a lovely garden.

Hospedaje Las Clavellinas, *2 blocks west of the gas station, 2 rooms, $.* A very nice hotel with a beautiful courtyard. The rooms lack furniture, but do have very nice single beds. Baths are all shared.

Hotel Turansa, *Canton Vitzal, ☎ 502/7-775-8487, www.sleeprentbuy.com/turansa/index.htm, 4 rooms, $.* Rooms at Hotel Turansa are medium-sized

Hotel Turansa

with nice double beds, cable TV and private baths with hot water. The hotel is clean and comfortable.

Hotel Ixil, *road to Sacapulas, three blocks south of church, ☎ 502/7-775-0036, 8 rooms, $.* This colonial-style hotel is probably the nicest in Nebaj. It's got a lovely courtyard onto which rooms open. The rooms themselves have pretty red tile floors and outside are hammocks and sitting areas. There is plenty of hot water.

Hotel Ixil Anexo, *2 blocks east of the bus terminal, ☎ 502/7-775-1091, 8 rooms, $.* This hotel is owned by the same people who operate Hotel Ixil. It's large, with two floors of cheery rooms that have private baths, hot water, cable TV and nice views of the garden. The terrace is a pleasant spot to hang out. Breakfast and dinner are available upon request.

WHERE TO EAT

Eateries are fairly simple. Several *comedores* operate on market days serving good, cheap food. Credit cards are not accepted.

Restaurante El Decanso, *2 blocks north of center.* This little café has cold beer and serves good sandwiches, soups and GuatemalaN specialities. Q10-25.

Pizza El Genio, *west of the plaza.* This eatery serves pizza, burgers and fries. Stick to the pizza, which they do well. Q14-30.

Pizza del César, *2 Av.* A small restaurant serving decent pizza. Q10-25 per person.

Asados El Pasabien, *road to Sacpulas.* This tiny restaurant serves excellet local dishes like churrascos, chuletas and chicken. Q15-30.

Comedor Lupita, *next to the Cultural Center.* This small eatery offers local food cooked by a local family. The daily specials are usually pretty good. Q10-20.

Maya Inca, *north side of the church.* Maya Inca is run by a Peruvian/Guatemalan family. It serves terrific Peruvian and Guatemalan food. Try the Papas rellenas, (baked potatoes stuffed with meat). Maya Inca is by far the best restaurant in town. Q14-30.

■ SAN JUAN COTZAL

San Cotzal was on an ancient Maya trade route and was the main village in the north until 1940, when a better road was built to Nebaj. The village itself is built along a sharp ridge in the mountain and is usually covered with a light fog. The small abode houses are set on steep unpaved streets. During the rainy season this village is impossible to reach.

The *huipiles* created here are quite beautiful, with geometric designs in blue, green and purple on a white background featuring birds. The village's main industry is the cultivation of the maguey plant used in the production of rope and other textiles. The resident women use the plant to make purses and mats. There is a large market every Saturday.

> GETTING HERE: *Buses to Cotzal leave Nebaj in the afternoon. Cotzal is only 12.4 miles (20 km) from Nebaj, but it can take over two hours to reach because of the winding mountain road that is unpaved in some sections. If it's raining hard, the bus is canceled.*

WHERE TO STAY & EAT

There are no hotels or restaurants in town. If you want to stay overnight, ask around to find someone who rents rooms in their house. The pharmacy (*farmacia*) usually has one or two rooms and can also arrange meals for you.

CHAJUL

Chajul is the most northerly city in the Ixil Triangle. It's a two-hour drive from Nebaj when the roads are dry. When it's raining, roads close. This is the most traditional village of all in this area and most of the residents speak only Ixil. The adobe houses have wooden beams and red-tile roofs. Since there are no roads and no cars, locals use horses and donkeys to get around.

The women all dress in red and wear old coins as decorative earrings and necklaces. The largest building is the beautifully restored colonial **church** which dates to the 16th century. It houses several ornate sculptures, including the sacred statue of Christo del Golgotha used during Holy Week (*Semana Santa*) celebrations. The Ixil are known for their murals and this church has been painted with a large mural dedicated to those killed during the civil war.

> GETTING HERE: *Buses don't run on a regular schedule to Chajul. The best days for travel are the market days, Tuesday and Friday, when there is a steady flow of trucks coming and going. You can hike to Chajul from Cotzal. It takes about two hours along a scenic highway.*

WHERE TO STAY & EAT

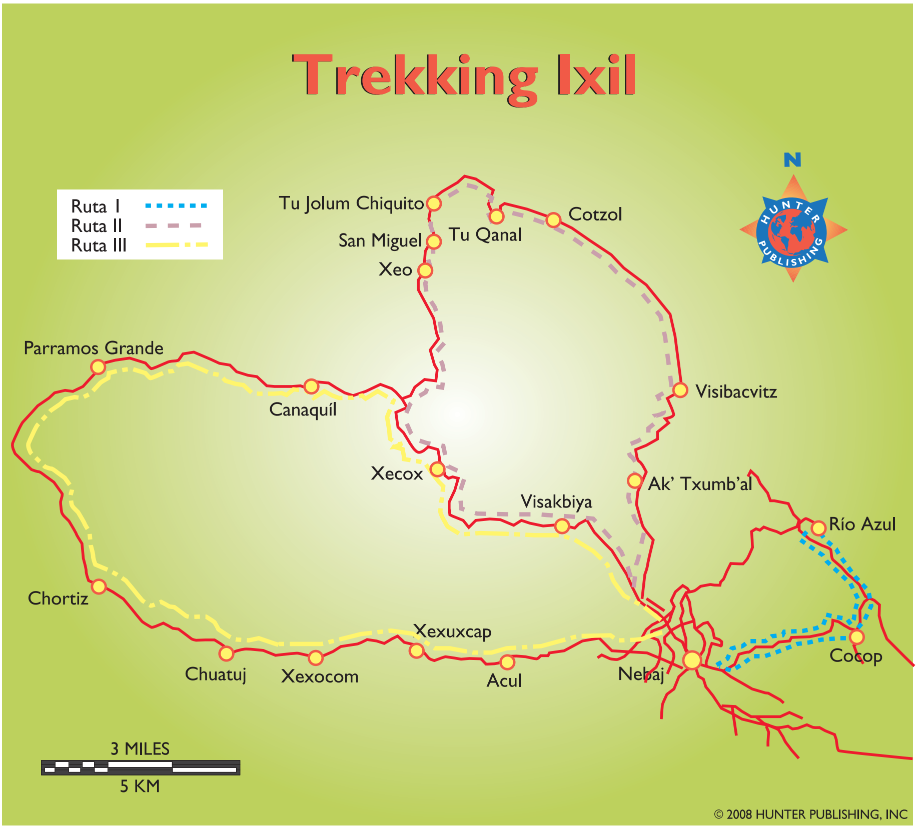
There are no hotels in this town. Ask at the post office for a list of families that rent rooms. There are several good ***comedores*** around the marketplace.

ADVENTURES ON FOOT

TREKKING IXIL

This eco-tour program was started in the Ixil area in early 2001. Trekking Ixil is a series of trails through the wilderness of the Cuchumatánes mountains. Funding was provided by the Spanish group PRODINT. Six remote Ixil mountain communities participate.

There are three separate routes you can take. The shortest takes two days, the longest, four. Treks are organized so that you are met by a designated contact who arranges your accommodation and food for that particular village. These people can also act as guides along the trails. Detailed trail maps can be downloaded from their website (www.nebaj.org) and you can request additional information from them at nebaj@quick.guate.com. PRODINT also publishes the maps in booklet form – currently they are only in Spanish.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Most accommodations are in newly built cabins equipped with wooden floors, large windows and siting areas with hammocks. The wood-framed beds have fresh linens and cozy blankets. There is solar electricity so you can have a hot shower after your trek. Bathrooms are a latrine/outhouse system. Meals, provided by local women, are sometimes vegetarian. Most of the villages you'll visit offer a *temascal*–a Maya sauna heated with wood and perfumed with incense. It's a wonderful antidote for sore muscles.

All the trails leave from Nebaj and are well marked at the beginning. Technically, you could do all the trails on your own but you may be better off hiring a local guide who will point out the local flora and fauna and can also arrange horses.

This is very rugged country, and you should be in somewhat decent shape before attempting these treks. The trails pass through stunning valleys and mountains and you will climb upward from 4,265 to 7,152 feet (1,300-2,180 meters). Each section takes between two to five hours to complete. The best time to come is between June and December, when there is minimal rain and wind. You are required to bring your own equipment. Good hiking boots are a must – don't do these trails in sandals or running shoes.

Prices are incredibly reasonable: Rooms, Q15 (US $2); meals Q15 (vegetarian, Q10); Temascal Sweat Lodge, Q15; guides Q25; guide with horses Q40. You pay the community leader for all services so the money goes directly to the locals.

Ruta I, Nebaj-Cocop-Río Azul

2 days, 1 night.
Community contact: Gaspar Brito Brito

Day One: You leave Nebaj and travel along a scenic trail overlooking the valley to **Cocop**, a small community of 35 families. The trail is relatively easy and takes just over two hours to complete. From the village you can see the whole valley and the neighboring village of Chajul. A trail continues for another five minutes to the even smaller community of Xemamatze before circling back to Cocop.

Cocop is a brave little community trying to rebuild after a tragic incident with the Guatemala Army. On March 4, 1981, Ash Wednesday, the army stormed the small village and killed everyone in sight. Sixty-eight people were slaughtered; the only survivors were those who were out of town shopping for supplies in Nebaj. They immediately left the area fearing the army would return for them. For years the village was deserted and did not even appear on maps. In 1990 the villagers returned, determined to revive their community. Easter is still not celebrated in this village.

Day Two: The trail continues down into the valley for one hour to Río Azul, then circles back for a 5½-mile (nine-km) trek back to Nebaj. Along the way you'll see a number of small unrestored Postclassic **Maya ruins** that are still used by the locals for religious ceremonies. This trail runs parallel to the highway (if you are tired, you can try to hitch a ride into Nebaj).

Ruta II, Nebaj-Xeo-Cotzol

3 days, 2 nights, moderately difficult.

Day One: This day will take you from Nebaj to Xeo. Your community contact is Miguel Brito Brito or Antonio Raymundo Santiago. To start this trek you have to grab a ride or a bus to Tzalbal or Salquil. Get off at the Tazalbal Lagoon (also known as La Antenna), where the trail starts. You travel uphill to 6,233 feet (1,900 meters) along a forest trail where there are giant pine and elder trees are covered with orchids. The entire trail takes a good three hours. Toward the end of the trail you will cross Río Tzel and Río Vicalama on a hanging footbridge. The trail beside Vicalama leads to Finca Tzí Tzel, a property being farmed collectively by the 57 families of Xeo. From there, it's a 10-minute walk to **Xeo**, where you can stock up on supplies for the next day.

Xeo is another village that has been rebuilt since the civil war. It, too, was completely destroyed in 1980. It is a very poor community whose residents make a living with corn, papaya, honey and cattle on their collective land. The people are courageous and generous.

Day Two: On this day you head from Xeo to Cotzol. Your community contact is José Marks Ramirez. The trail becomes increasingly difficult as it ascends to 7,709 feet (2,350 meters) above the valley. After three hours of trekking you will come to **Tu Jolum Chiquito** and **Tu Qanal**, tiny picturesque villages in a subtropical humid forest. They don't get many visitors here, so expect a commotion when you arrive. From there, follow the trail for another 20 minutes to the main highway and continue along that road until you reach **Cotzol** (another 25 minutes), where you will spend the night.

Cotzol is a larger village with 80 families. It was used as a military base during the war so escaped being destroyed. Currently, it is a religious center with several Maya altars nearby that are used for ceremonies. The view here is incredible and the nearby Cuchumatánes mountains tower above you. In the distance you can see the Nebaj and the surrounding valley.

THE LEGEND OF EL CERRO COTZOL

Nearby is a huge mountain known as El Cerro Cotzol. Long ago, a few of the first settlers decided to have a party on El Cerro. It was a loud and long gathering that went on all night. When the party-goers didn't come back, their relatives went out looking for them, traveling across valleys and mountains, calling for them on drums. Three days passed and party-goers returned as mysteriously as they had vanished. They had been kidnapped and held captive by the spirit of the mountain, who was displeased with their noisy celebrations. Since then, El Cerro Cotzol has been treated as a sacred site and is a party-free zone.

Day Three: Today you will head back to Nebaj. You begin a two-hour descent down to the valley where you follow Río Tzel to the village of **Visibacvitz**. A rest stop here looks over the coffee plantations. Another hour of hiking along a small highway brings you to **Ak' Txumb'al** ("new mentality") village. The army created this community for refugees escaping the villages that had been burned to a crisp by the army. Nebaj is another 4.9 miles (eight km) along the scenic highway, approximately a two-hour hike. There is a fair amount of traffic along this road so you can hitch a ride if you are footsore.

Ruta III, Nebaj-Xexocom-Chortiz -Parramos Gde.

4 days, 3 nights; very challenging.
This tour starts by visiting two small Kiché villages and then moves into the heartland of the Ixil Triangle.

Day One: Nebaj to Xexocom. Your community contact is Diego Perez Ajanel. The trail from Nebaj begins its descent into narrow Valley of Acul. A 20-minute hike brings you to **Acul** village on Río Azul. You come out by the highway, pass by **Cerro Tzí Tzoo**, and continue for another 40 minutes to **Xexuxcap**. Both villages were used as army bases during the civil war. This challenging trail continues gradually ascending to 7,283 feet (2,220 meters), where the **Xexocom** community is located. The day's hike takes between three and four hours and offers incredible scenery as you pass between two mountains.

Xexocom is a farming community of about 30 families. Many have returned from the United States where they fled to during the civil war. Your room will be in the Community Center, which also houses a small workshop of weavers who work on wool ponchos using a traditional weaving method found only in this area. The ponchos are quite lovely. You spend the night here and can either turn back to Nebaj or continue for the most challenging part of the trek.

Day Two: Xexocom to Chortiz. Your community contact is Felipe Alvarez Ajanel. The next part of this trek is a four-hour hike across the plateau of the **Cuchumatánes**. In less than two hours you rise 3,280 feet (1,000 meters) and the views are awe-inspiring. On the horizon you can see a long line of more than 10 volcanoes. The trail levels off at 10,000 feet (3,300 meters) as it reaches the small village of **Chuatuj**. Take a few moments to visit the church that features murals painted by the Ixil. Some date back to colonial times. A fairly smooth path continues for another hour to **Chortiz**, a small community of 35 families who raise goats and sheep. Xexocom and Chortiz are inhabited by the Kiché Maya whose ancestors first came to the area in the early 1900s from San Francisco de Alto.

Day Three: Chortiz-Parramos Grande. Your community contact is Pedro Ceto Corio. The trail from Chortiz to Parramos Grande follows the edge of the Cuchumatánes up to 7,545 feet (2,300 meters). You **must have a guide** to do the last stretch, which lasts just over one hour. You emerge over the top of Parramos Grande in front of the impressive Cerro Sumal and begin a two-hour descent of 3,280 feet (1,000 meters) through pine forest to the natural plateau, Parramos Grande. This is the most dramatic part of the trail.

There are 80 families in Parramos Grande and plenty of local guides ready to take you out to a series of incredible caves scattered in the area. The famous anthropologist Steward Lincoln first explored these caves in 1941. In the largest cave, Xé Tixh, "Where Once a God Lived," Lincoln found an ancient altar covered with stucco and engraved anthropomorphic figures. The caves are still being used for ceremonies. You spend the night in Parramos Grande.

Day Four: Parramos Grande to Nebaj. The trail continues north for two hours to Entrada Xepium village at the foot of Cerro Salquil. This is a fairly easy trail, but incredibly scenic nonetheless. Just before you emerge on the highway you'll pass by a beautiful waterfall, **Cascada Parramos Chiquita**, just by the trail that leads down to the village of **Salquil Grande**. You can catch a bus from the village to Nebaj; they leave twice a day.

IXCÁN

North of the Ixil Triangle is an untamed frontier of deep jungle and mountains known as the Ixcán. It shares a border with the Lacandón Rainforest in Mexico.

HISTORY

Ixcán was settled in the 1960s and 70s when poor landless Maya from the departments of Huehuetenango and Quiché began homesteading here. Maryknoll missionary **Father William Woods** flew thousands into the region in his small plane. He helped the new settlers buy land and set up four communities that became home to 14,000 people. In many ways, it was an ideal blending of seven different Maya tribes working together to build a new life. The Guatemalan government felt Woods was a communist. He died in a suspicious plane crash in 1976. For many years, it was thought the crash was an accident... until his name turned up on one of the army death lists. In 1980 the army came into the area and burned the settlement to the ground, claiming it was a guerilla army stronghold. They killed hundreds of men, woman and children; most of the survivors fled to Mexico.

Old tree, Lacandón rainforest

In 1995 the 90 leaders of the Ixcán community successfully petitioned the Guatemalan government to return to their settlements. **Marcelino Lopez** also began a campaign to bring the remains of Father Woods back to Ixcán. His remains were placed in a special grave in Barillas, the first settlement he started, and a monument was put up in Mayalán, the second-largest settlement in the area.

This is one of the last true virgin rainforests. You can explore it via Lachua Lagoon National Park (*Parque Nacional Laguna Lachua*), covered in the Alta Verapaz section (page 285), or approach it from the Mexican side, where the Ixcán region has been declared part of the Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve in Chiapas.

IXCÁN ECO-TOUR OPERATORS

The **Ixcán Scientific Station** offers eco-tours with local guides. You can customize wilderness treks, day hikes and rafting excursions or explore the little-known ruins of **Chanatun** along Río Tzendales. This is rugged country with few creature comforts, but it offers the chance to explore one of the last true wilderness areas. There aren't many tours in this region so you will be largely on your own. Catch the bus from Huehue to Playa Grande and go from there. Be prepared for a long and fairly ardous journey along dreadful roads. A few travel agencies offer the trip from the Mexican side, including **Ecoaventura Mexicana**, Villa de las Lomas #67, Col. Lomas de las Palmas, Huixquilucan, 52787, in Mexico ☎ 5-290-6386, www.ecoaventuramex.com, which offers archaeology/birding tours.

Departments of Las Verapaces

These two sister departments, **Alta Verapaz** and **Baja Verapaz**, share a similar history and together make up the final section of Los Altiplanos. Physically, they are quite different. The more southerly Baja Verapaz sits in the flat-bottomed Salamá Valley with rivers and lush forests. It is sparsely populated with **Achi' Maya**. Alta Verapaz is home to the **Q'ekchí** (or K'ekchí) and, to a lesser extent, the **Poqomchi' Maya**. All three tribes are often referred to as the **Rabinal Maya**. Since Alta Verapaz is on higher grounds, a continuous light rain, known as *chipi-chipi*, falls here year-round. This area is becoming very popular with eco-tourists.

Monja blanca orchid

Two of Guatemala's national symbols are found in Alta Verapaz: the monja blanca orchid (shown here) and the resplendent quetzal.

HISTORY

The fierce **Q'ekchí** once ruled this part of the highlands. They were considered the most bloodthirsty of all the Maya and were feared by many. They were the only tribe that the Conquistadors were unable to tame.

Alvarado arrived here in 1520; by 1530 he had withdrawn his men and named the area **Tezulutlan-Tierra de Guerra** (Land of War.)

The great scholar and humanist **Fray Bartolomé de las Casas** asked the king to let him try and convert the Indians to Christianity. Since de las Casas had successfully brought about a peace accord with the Indians of Chiapas, Mexico, the Spanish government agreed to his proposal and decreed that no Spanish soldiers were allowed into the area. De las Casas arrived with some Indian musicians from Chiapas and a handful of Dominican friars. The brothers set about learning the Q'ekchí language and translated several verses of the bible, setting them to song. They taught these songs to the traders and gave them a variety of goods to sell.

The Q'ekchí chieftain, **Juan Matalbatz**, heard the songs and became curious about this Conquistador who wore robes instead of armor and was not interested in gold. The traders arranged for the two men to meet. Shortly afterwards, Matalbatz converted to Christianity. In 1548, the Q'ekchí became Spanish citizens and King Carlos V renamed the area **Las Verapaces** (True Peace). As Spanish citizens, the Q'ekchí were allowed to keep their language and customs.

Sadly, peace did not last. De las Casas died in 1576 and the Spanish colonial government took control. The soldiers sent into the area were convinced there was hidden gold and ended up looting the villages and killing many of the locals. When nothing was found, the soldiers left, but the damage was done. Las Verapaces became a backwater community and it continued to be overlooked even after Guatemala became independent 1821.

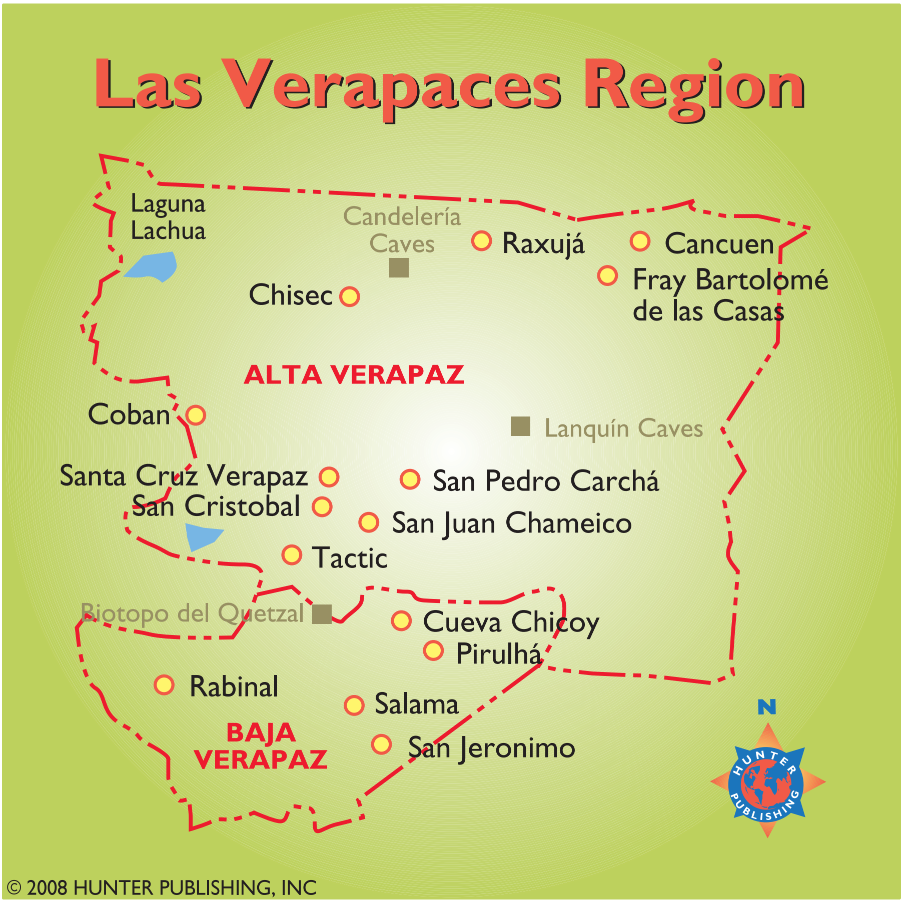
In 1870, **President Barrios** invited German immigrants to develop the region. They were given huge tracts of land on which they built coffee plantations. The Germans quickly took control, but never really assimilated. They kept their German passports, spoke their own language and had their own schools. In the 1930s, most of the Guatemalan Germans actively supported Hitler and when the United States declared war on Germany in 1941, Guatemala was pressured into "containing the enemy presence." The government responded by deporting all Germans and confiscating their property. But the coffee plantations remained and Las Verapaces remains one of the largest producers of coffee. In the last few years, cardamom has also become an important export. Germans first planted this spice as a hobby, but it has become the country's second-largest export and La Verapaces is now the largest producer of cardamom in the world.

GETTING HERE & GETTING AROUND

Only one main road leads through Las Verapaces, so it's hard to get lost. At the junction of El Rancho, Carretera Atlántico (CA-9) branches off north to CA-14. This road climbs through the foothills of the Sierra de las Miñas before heading down into the Salamá Valley to Baja Verapaz and then ascending to Alta Verapaz.

Since Cobán is the main tourist destination, all tourist shuttles go there from Antigua, Guatemala City, Río Dulce and Flores. Fares vary. Shuttles are the most comfortable and quickest way to travel. From Cobán, you can take local chicken buses to visit the villages.

Public buses service Las Verapaces region. Depending on the bus company, you may have to change at El Rancho junction on CA-9.


Las Verapaces Region
Laguna Lachua
Candelería Caves
Raxujá
Cancuen
Fray Bartolomé de las Casas
Chisec
ALTA VERAPAZ
Coban
Lanquín Caves
Santa Cruz Verapaz
San Cristobal
San Pedro Carchá
San Juan Chameico
Tactic
Biotopo del Quetzal
Cueva Chicoy
Pirulhá
Rabinal
Salama
BAJA VERAPAZ
San Jeronimo
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SALAMÁ

Baja Verapaz is the much smaller department in Las Verapaces. It has remote **Achi Maya** villages. Sections of the region are dry and flat and form part of the Salamá Valley, but the department does eventually become mountainous and there are some incredible mountain trails to explore, along with caves and the wonderful **Quetzal Biotope**. Since it is so lush and green, producing some of the country's best fruit, the area has been dubbed the Green Heart of Guatemala (*la Corazón Verde de Guatemala*).

Salamá, the capital of Baja Verapaz, is a prosperous village with a mostly *Ladino* population. You will see little traditional dress. There isn't much to do in the village, but the Sunday **market** is worth a look since it does carry some of the famous **Rabinal pottery** (see page 256 for details).

The colonial **church** dating back to the 16th century is also worth a visit. It faces a lovely main plaza with sculptured trees. The church has a simple façade and a gold-leafed altar and a pulpit with Rococo carvings. The only other pulpit like this in Latin America is in Lima, Peru. A life-size statue shows Jesus lying in his satin-lined coffin with his wounds bandaged.

West of the city the highway ends and a dirt road its climb into the mountains where the traditional villages of San Miguel Chicaj, Rabinal and Cubulco are found.

TRADITIONAL VILLAGES

RABINAL

Rabinal was founded in 1537 by **Fray Bartholome de las Casas** as his missionary base. It was the first settlement of Achi Maya to convert to Christianity. Little has changed since that time, although the natives have largely abandoned the Catholic faith and now follow their pre-Columbian traditions. They are famous for dance and drama during fiestas, when traditional costumes are worn and instruments are played. The most important festival is from January 19 to 25, the Fiesta de San Pablo (Saint Paul), celebrating their patron saint.

Rabinal is famed for its decorative **gourds** that are cut into a variety of shapes, carved with incised patterns and painted red, yellow and black (each artist has a unique pattern).

The unique black **pottery** produced in Rabinal is exquisite. The most popular pieces are the cups for drinking chocolate .

At the Sunday **market** all the artists bring their wares to sell. Be sure to pick up some of the incredible oranges grown here. Not many tourists make it this way so you can find better prices for the gourds, pottery and textiles than you will elsewhere.

GETTING HERE: *Rabinal is 11.8 miles (19 km) west of Salamá via unpaved roads. It can take up to an hour to get there from town via car or colectivo (US $3). Regular bus service leaves from Guatemala and Cobán and travels along the back roads. You will pass through the village of San Miguel Chicaj before reaching Rabinal.*

SAN JERÓNIMO

This little village is built in the middle of sugar cane plantations. San Jerónimo was originally a hacienda founded in 1560 by a group of Dominican monks. In 1601, **Friar Rafaél Luján** founded a sugarcane refinery here – the first in Central America. The factory produced sugar, grapes, wines and various fruit liquors. It became one of the most favored possessions of the Spanish Conquistadors and as a result the area was developed into a village.

Museo Regional del Trapiche (Sugar Mill Museum). The original sugar mill and its equipment have been turned into a museum. A tour includes a visit to the refinery to see the entire sugar production from the harvesting of cane to the boiling room and water wheel. There's a collection of antique photographs, and many of the artifacts here are over 500 years old. A small gift shop in the hacienda sells souvenirs, ceramics and textiles; next door is a well-maintained children's playground. This is a popular tour with children. Open daily, 8 am-5 pm. Free admission. The sugar museum is behind the church.

Iglesia de San Jerónimo. The church and monastery were built in 1601 to house the monks who came to work on the sugar mill. The monks could walk from the factory right into church. The building has three vaults made from a mixture of limestone, sand, honey and egg whites (this unusual formula obviously worked because the church has withstood time very well). The style is neoclassical and the 18-carat gold baroque altarpiece that was shipped from France fills an entire archway. Inside is a portrait of El Virgén de Guadalupe done by the famous colonial artist Cristóbal Villalpando. The church keeps irregular hours, so ask at the museum to be let in.

Antiguo Acueducto (Ancient Aqueducts). Those Dominican monks were an industrious bunch. In 1679, when the sugar refinery was at the peak of its production, Friar Francisco Gallegos built Roman-style aqueducts to carry water to the village and factory. The ancient canal system is now overgrown, but you can follow the aqueducts through town out to the local river.

Balneario La Presa, Río La Presa. This waterway, which runs just outside the village, serves as the main water supply. It is a tributary of Río Matanzas that originates in the mountains. The recreation center here has small picnic shelters, several good swimming spots and a number of nature trails leading through the forests. You can camp here. No entrance fee.

> GETTING HERE: *San Jerónimo is 6.2 miles (10 km) from the main highway into Salamá. Take the bus to Salamá and ask to be let off at the cruceros (cross-roads). From there, it's a 15-minute walk into town. You can also go into Salamá and hire a taxi for about Q50 one-way.*

There are no hotels in San Jerónimo so you will have to return to Salamá to spend the night.

PURULHA/CLOUD FOREST TREKS

Purulha is a small rural village that grows the plant Xate, commonly used in North American floral arrangements. You'll see the plant on hills, covered in large black plastic tarps for protection. There are no services at all in this town, but it is the jumping-off point for visits to the surrounding cloud forests.

MARIO DARY RIVERA BIOTÓPO DEL QUETZAL

This famous and popular reserve covers 2,500 acres (11 square km) of tropical cloud forest. The University of San Carlos manages the biotope and has opened a small section to the public. The high humidity has created a dense jungle of great beauty. Two trails wind through the misty forest, past ancient trees, orchids, red flowering bromeliads, mosses and ferns. Parts of the trail overlook the mountains, which are usually shrouded in clouds. The aguacatillo tree grows in abundance and is the favorite tree of the quetzal, the national bird. Although there is a high population of quetzals in the park, they are surprisingly difficult to spot because they can remain motionless for hours and their feathers blend with the surrounding flowers. The best time to spot the birds is at the crack of dawn, when they come to feed in the trees close to the highway.

Resplendent quetzal

The easier trail, Senderos Helecho (Path of the Ferns) is 1.2 miles (2 km) long and takes 1½ hours to complete, depending on your fitness level. The more challenging Senderos los Musgos (Path of the Mosses) is 2.4 miles (four km) and takes between 2½ and 4½ hours to complete. Both trails pass by waterfalls and lagoons where you can stop and swim in the pure mountain water. At the entrance to the park are rangers, a small natural museum with photos of quetzals and a small store that sells snacks, drinks and some souvenirs. Camping is no longer permitted in the park, despite what people will tell you. Open daily, 7 am-4 pm. Admission is Q20.

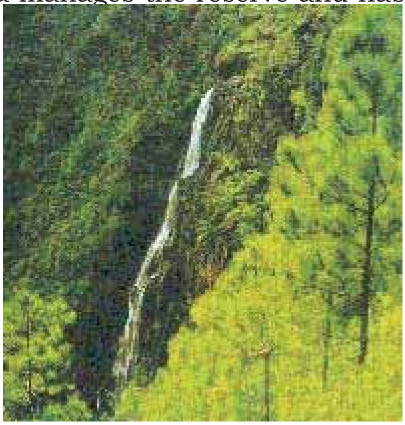
There are several excellent hotels close by the reserve (see *Places to Stay*, below).

GETTING HERE: *You can easily do this tour on your own as a day-trip. The biotope is located right on the Guatemala-Cobán highway at Km 160, four km south of Purulha village. Whether you are coming from Guatemala or Cobán, just ask the driver to let* *you off Biotope del Quetzal. To return, simply hail one of the many colectivos and buses that pass by every 15-30 minutes.*

SIERRA DE LAS MINAS BIOSPHERE RESERVE

El Salto de Chilascó (Waterfall of Chilascó), set in the heart of Las Minas Biosphere, is a spectacular waterfall that drops 426 feet (130 meters) down the Oscuras Mountains. It is 70 meters wide, making it the longest and highest waterfall in Central America. The reserve is home to many animals: white-tail deer, coyotes, monkeys, quetzals, armadillos, wild turkeys, hummingbirds, butterflies and over 250 different types of birds make this place their home. The extremely rare and extremely endangered *Lycaste Virignal* orchid is found here, alongside numerous *Monja Blanca* orchids – Guatemala's national flower.

Fundacion Defensores de la Naturaleza manages the reserve and has started working directly with the community of San Rafael Chilascó to organize trips to the falls. A new tourist center at the entrance to the community offers guides, horses and other services. The trail to the falls takes about four hours and there is option of camping overnight. To plan your trip, contact the tourism office at San Rafael Chilascó, ☎ 502/5-301-8928, 502/5-776-1683, www.chilasco.net.ms, or the Oficina de Turismo, Calle principal, 7a Av 6-38, Zona 1, Salamá, ☎ 502/2-514-1704.



El Salto de Chilascó

CUEVA CHICOY

This natural cathedral is a sacred ceremonial site for the Q'ecqhi Maya, who still conduct ceremonies here. It's actually a 196-foot-wide (60-meter) sinkhole with natural lighting. Clusters of stalagmites stretch up to 50 feet (15 meters) to a high, vaulted ceiling. The light playing on the walls of the grotto walls creates an ethereal effect and some believe this cave holds special powers. Certainly, the Maya believe that caves are the entrance to the underworld, Xilbalba. The entrance to the cave is covered with trees and vegetation. In early mornings a mist shrouds the entrance until the first beam of sunlight hits, casting an eerie green shadow on the walls.

The Maya use the cave of Chicoy for healing and making requests to the gods. You will see many candles on the main altar. Monthly ceremonies draw Maya priests who offer prayers and gifts, while musicians play and incense burns. The priests bless people with candles and, sometimes, firewater (*aguardiente*). Foreigners are welcome to attend these ceremonies as long as they keep a low profile and leave the cameras outside. You are invited to attend only if you come across the ceremony. Otherwise, you are not given any information. There is an entrance fee of Q5.

> GETTING HERE: *The caves are at Km 169 on the main highway between Guatemala City and Cobán, about four miles north of Purulha. Catch any bus heading either way along the highway and ask to be dropped at Finca Chicoy. From the highway, it's just under a mile to the entrance.*

WHERE TO STAY

SALAMÁ

Most of the hotels in Salamá are in the budget category. None of the hotels or restaurants accept credit cards.

Hotel Maricritz, *Ruta 2 4-32, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-940-0550, 10 rooms, $.* This fairly modern hotel has large rooms with two double beds, private baths with hot water, and cable TV. It doesn't have much in the way of ambience, but the inner courtyard is quiet and staff is very nice.

Hotel Tezultan, *Ruta 4, 4-99, Zona 1, Barrio El Centro, ☎ 502/7-940-0141, 13 rooms, $.* You'll find this hotel tucked behind the Texaco Station just off the plaza. The colonial building offers nice rooms centered around a courtyard filled with ancient trees. Each has a double bed, private bath with lots of hot water, and cable TV.

HOTEL PRICE CHART

Prices are per person

$	under US $25
$$	US $26-50
$$$	US $51-85
$$$$	US $86-125
$$$$$	over US $125

Hospedaje Juárez, *10a Av, 5-55, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-940-0055, 15 rooms, $.* A very basic hotel that is clean, but not luxurious. The beds are like slabs of cement and rooms offer barely enough room to turn around. There are two locations, both with bad signage, so ask to be pointed in the right direction.

Hotel San Ignacio, *4a Calle A 7-09, Zona 1, ☎/fax 502/7-940-0186, 12 rooms, $.* The San Ignacio is a family-run hotel that's very clean and safe. Rooms are comfortable, but a little plain. Bathrooms are shared and come with plenty of hot water.

Hotel Real Legendario, *8a Av 3-57, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-940-0187, 21 rooms, $.* The largest hotel in town is set close to the cathedral. It offers good value, with comfortable, large rooms that have two double beds, private bath with hot water and cable TV. Parking is available.

RABINAL

Hotels are very basic, bordering on primitive. They have no phones. You may be more comfortable heading back to Salamá for the night.

Posada San Pablo, *Central Plaza, ☎ 502/7-940-0211, 8 rooms, $.* This is the newest hotel in Rabinal and it's spotless. Rooms are basic with a double bed, fan and dresser. Bathrooms are shared, but there is hot water.

Hospedaje Cabelleros, *Central Plaza, 6 rooms, $.* Hospedaje Cabelleros will do in a pinch. It is somewhat clean and the rooms, although tiny, have good beds.

Gran Hotel Rabinal Achi, *Calle 1, 36 rooms, $$.* This hotel has nice large rooms with comfortable beds and lots of hot water.

PURULHA

Country Delight Reserve, *Km 166.5, Purulha, ☎ 502/5-709-1149, 2 rooms, 2 rooms & 2 bungalows. $$.* This working farm is a member of the Association of Guatemalan Private Natural Reserves (*La Asociación de Reservas Naturales Privadas de Guatemala*). Farm owners belonging to this organization have set aside a portion of their land as a reserve with lodging and hiking trails. Country Delight is located at the edge of the Biotope and quetzals come to roost in the trees at dawn and at dusk. There are two rooms and two bungalows on the Swiss chalet-style property. The bungalows can sleep up to four people and are suitable for families. All accommodations are furnished in bright textiles and have incredibly cozy beds. The restaurant serves homemade bread and traditional specialties using produce and including organic chickens from their farm. Meals are enjoyed in front of a roaring fire. There are horses, a small pond with fish and nature trails.

Hotel Posada Montaña Del Quetzal, *Km 156.5, Carreterra Guatemala-Cobán, ☎ 502/2-331-0929, www.hposadaquetzal.com, 18 bungalows. $$.* This is another member of the Association of Guatemalan Private Natural Reserves. It sits on the edge of the Sierra de las Minas Reserve. The property is set up like a resort, with private bungalows set away from the main building. Rustic country-style bungalows are equipped with antique furniture, sitting rooms, fireplaces and private baths. The main lobby has a restaurant serving international cuisine, a pool and recreational center with nature trails. Nature walks to the nearby rivers and into the jungle are offered, as are trips to the Biotope.

Ram Tzul Eco-Lodge, *Km 158, Carreterra Guatemala-Cobán, ☎ 502/ 5-335-1805, http://m-y-c.com.ar/*

ramtzul/, 8 rooms, 5 cabañas, $$. Ram-Tzul (Spirit of the Mountain) is a private ecological park located between the Sierra de las Minas Reserve and the Biotope Quetzal in an area known as Ram Tzul. The forests here are a mixture of cypress and pine and the eco-lodge was created to blend into these surroundings. Bamboo walls and natural stone floors are covered with palapa roofs. Private rooms are equipped with two double beds, mosquito nets and have views of the forests. Bathrooms are shared. Cabañas resemble small cottages and have private balconies overlooking the mountains as well as private bathrooms. There's an information center and a small restaurant.

A nature trail leads from Ram Tzul to a large waterfall that cascades down the mountain to the lagoon and several swimming spots. Other trails lead through the forest and offer great birding. The resort has a reforestation program and has replanted over 21 different species of pine and registered the surrounding area as a protected zone.

SAN JERONIMO

Hotel Hacienda Real el Trapiche, *at entrance to town, ☎ 502/7-940-2542, 10 rooms, $.* In keeping with the general ambience of the town, this hotel is colonial in style, with comfortable rooms that have private baths. It's within walking distance of the town and the restaurant serves excellent Guatemala food.

WHERE TO EAT

No credit cards are accepted in any of these restaurants.

Café Deli-Doñas, *main plaza, Salamá.* This is a small pleasant café that has excellent coffee and good cakes and pastries. Q7-15.

Cafeteria Apolo XI, *4a Calle A 7-09, Zona 1, Salamá.* This restaurant with the rather incongruous name offers good basic meals of rice and beans, chicken, grilled meats and soups. The portions are gigantic. Q20-35.

Restaurant Happy Ranch, *Ruta 4, 4-99, Zona 1, Barrio El Centro, Salamá.* Right next to Hotel Tezultan, this eatery offers roasted chicken dinners. They are delicious. Q25 per chicken.

Restaurant el Ganadero, *one block east of main plaza, Salamá.* This little eatery serves good sandwiches and offers daily lunch specials. Q15-35.

Pollo to Go, *6ta Calle 7-20, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-940-0804, Salamá.* Despite the hilarious Spanglish name, this is the best restaurant in town.

It offers huge and delicious roasted chicken meals as well as local specialties such as *asado lomito* (grilled sausages). Their hamburgers and French fries are very good. Take-out is available. Q25-40.

COBÁN

Alta Verapaz is the largest of the two departments. Its capital city is Cobán, located at the end of the highway. There are a number of remote and hard-to-access villages in the departments northern reaches. The area is part of a large watershed that originates in Mexico and is filled with rivers and lakes. The mighty **Río Cahabon** and **Río Polochíc** flow through this department, are fed by the Chioxy-Usumacinta river system that starts in the Gulf of Mexico. The Cahabon and Polochíc empty into **Lake Izabal** and **Río Dulce**, which flows out to the Caribbean Sea.

Cobán rests 5,000 feet (4,316 meters) above sea level and has a surprisingly large population – 70,000. It is the principal city in the region and one of the largest in the country.

HISTORY

Cobán was founded in 1543 by **Fray Bartolomé de las Casas** when he came to convert the Q'ekchí to god-fearing Christians. Shortly afterward, King Carlos V declared Cobán an Imperial City. This didn't amount to much since Cobán remained isolated for hundreds of years, allowing the Rabinal Maya to preserve their language and culture.

The city grew extensively during the 1870s when German immigrants came. They found the area with its mild temperatures and annual rainfall of 70 inches had the perfect conditions for growing coffee and they began building huge *fincas*. Other Germans followed, opening up silver mines, restaurants and hotels. Eventually, they controlled most of Cobán and it became known as the German Capital of Central America. In order to get their coffee to market they built a railway that extended down from Cobán to Lake Izabal.

When the Germans were deported in 1941, Cobán continued growing and exporting coffee. It remains the largest producer of Guatemala's gourmet coffees, and is also becoming a major tourist destination, serving as the jumping-off point for explorations into the incredible natural wonders in the area.

GETTING HERE & GETTING AROUND

Buses and shuttles offer direct service to Cobán. The city's hotels, restaurants and shops are located within walking distance of the main square so you won't need transportation in town. If you do want to get to other sites outside of the downtown core, taxis are cheap and plentiful. The average ride costs Q10.

Getting to some of the outlying attractions can be difficult. The roads outside of the city are terrible and, although buses are frequent, they often don't leave until they are full. You have to be patient and allow for extra traveling time. Some travel agencies offer shuttle service to Cobán at reasonable rates. However, most official tours are terribly overpriced.

See pages 71 and 102 for a list of companies offering shuttle services.

There are two "main" bus terminals. The newer terminal services buses heading to northern cities. It is located near Parque Nacional Las Victorias on Calle 3a. The older bus terminal serves buses coming from the south. It's located down the hill behind City Hall on 2a Av between 1a Calle and 3a Calle.

Local buses leave from various corners around the city and there is no way to figure out the routes. The best strategy is to ask at your hotel and be pointed to the appropriate street corner. You can also ask the taxi drivers in the main plaza, although they will try to convince you that you need to take a taxi to get the bus stop.

STUDY SPANISH, Q'EKCHÍ

Very little English is spoken in Cobán, which makes it an excellent place to study Spanish. You'll learn quickly in this total-immersion environment. There are three language schools in town.

School of Arts and Language, Finca Tzalampec, 16 Av 2-50, Zona 1, ☎ 502/5-953-9062. Located on a small *finca* outside Cobán, this school offers one-on-one Spanish lessons. They allow only one student per host family. The school itself is new, but the director has many years of teaching Spanish in Guatemala and El Salvador. After-school activities include a workshop in marimba playing, weaving and cooking. Cost is US $110 per week, including room, board and all Spanish lessons.

Escuela De Español Muq'bil' B'e, 6 Av 5-39, Zona 3, ☎ 502/5-951-2459. This school is the oldest school in Cobán. Teacher Oscar Macz specializes in Maya Q'ekchí classes and also offers Spanish lessons – a combination of the two is a popular choice. Special outings are offered when there are three or more students in attendance. Cost for a 20-hour week of lessons, including a host family stay, is US $100.

Active Spanish School, 3 Calle 6-12, Zona 1, ☎ 502/5-951-1432. This is a lively school with lessons in a private home. Outings include trips to *fincas*, parks and clubs, where you will learn more about the social scene in Cobán. The school also offers classes in Q'ekchí. Cost for a 20-hour week of lessons with a host family is US $90.

Eco Cabaña, Km 6, road to Chamil, www.guatemala365.com. This small, rustic school is run by a Guatemalan family who returned from living in the States for many years. The school is in a refurbished farmhouse in the foothills of the mountains near San Juan Chamelco, just outside of the city. Fees are US $60 for one week of 20 hours, including your stay with a host family. The schools is very busy from June through August, so book ahead if you intend to come during those months.

SIGHTSEEING

The **Central Plaza** is a reminder of the German heyday in Cobán. It features a number of statues set alongside trees and benches. To the north is the large **Metropolitan Cathedrale**, with its original bell dating back to 1548.

Calle Diagonal 4 divides the plaza and on the southern side is a small area with a bulletin board posting bus schedules, maps and other information. This serves as the official **tourist office**. Behind the other end of the plaza is the rather dignified **City Hall**. Across the street, in another colonial building, is the local **market**, which sells lots of good handicrafts. It's open every day. In the evenings when the market has closed, street vendors take over selling food. Most festivities take place in the Central Plaza.

Principe Maya Museum, 6a Av 4-26, Zona 3, ☎ 502/5-952-1541. This small museum has an excellent collection of Maya and pre-Columbian artifacts found in the area. Jade pieces, obsidian arrowheads, work tools, ceremonial objects and polychromatic pottery are on display alongside hieroglyphic panels, a replica of a Maya tomb and a collection of clay figurines representing warriors wearing animal masks. The museum is officially open from 9 am to 6 pm, Monday to Saturday, but call ahead since the posted hours are sometimes ignored. Admission is Q10.

Iglesia Calvario, 7a Av, Zona 1, take staircase. The Calvario is a focal point for many religious ceremonies practiced in Cobán throughout the year. Small worship altars have been built in front of the church. Los Tigrillos Altare is used for requests for help and wishes. Farther up the hill is San Salvador, the altar for help with love and relationships. The altar closest to the church, La Calavera, is for good health. The 1810 church itself is very simple, with whitewashed walls and little adornment. Candles are found on every surface and you will see devout Q'eqchí on their knees whispering prayers. Don't disturb them and don't take pictures. The panoramic view shows the whole of the city with the mountains in the distance. You can walk around the church to get into Parque Nacional Las Victorias (see below). It's best not to come to the church very early in the morning or at night. Robberies do occur.

Parque Nacional Las Victorias (Victoria Park, named for the victory of independence), 9a Av and 3a Calle, Zona 1. This large park is located in the north end of Cobán. It features four nature trails that lead to different areas of the park. The longest and most difficult is four miles (7½ km) and takes up to four hours to complete. The park's forest supports a variety of orchids and other flowers, birds and butterflies and an ornamental garden has medicinal plants. The park is ideal for children and has a playground, picnic tables, barbecue grills and small snack shop. Camping is permitted, but you must get permission from the tourist office in town. Open 8 am-4 pm, daily. Admission is Q5 for adults, Q2 for children.

Monarch butterfly,
Parque Nacional Las Victorias

Vivero Verapaz Orchid Nursery, Carretera Antigua, 18 miles (three km) from town center, ☎ 502/5-952-1133 or 5-951-4202. This Garden of Eden has 60,00 orchids from 750 species on display. The nursery was the life work of Otto Mittelstaedt who originally came to Cobán as a coffee farmer. His widow now runs the nursery. Be sure to see the collection of 200 miniature orchids – the best in the world. Some are so tiny they can be seen only with a magnifying glass. There are also many examples of the *monja blanca* orchid, Guatemala's national flower.

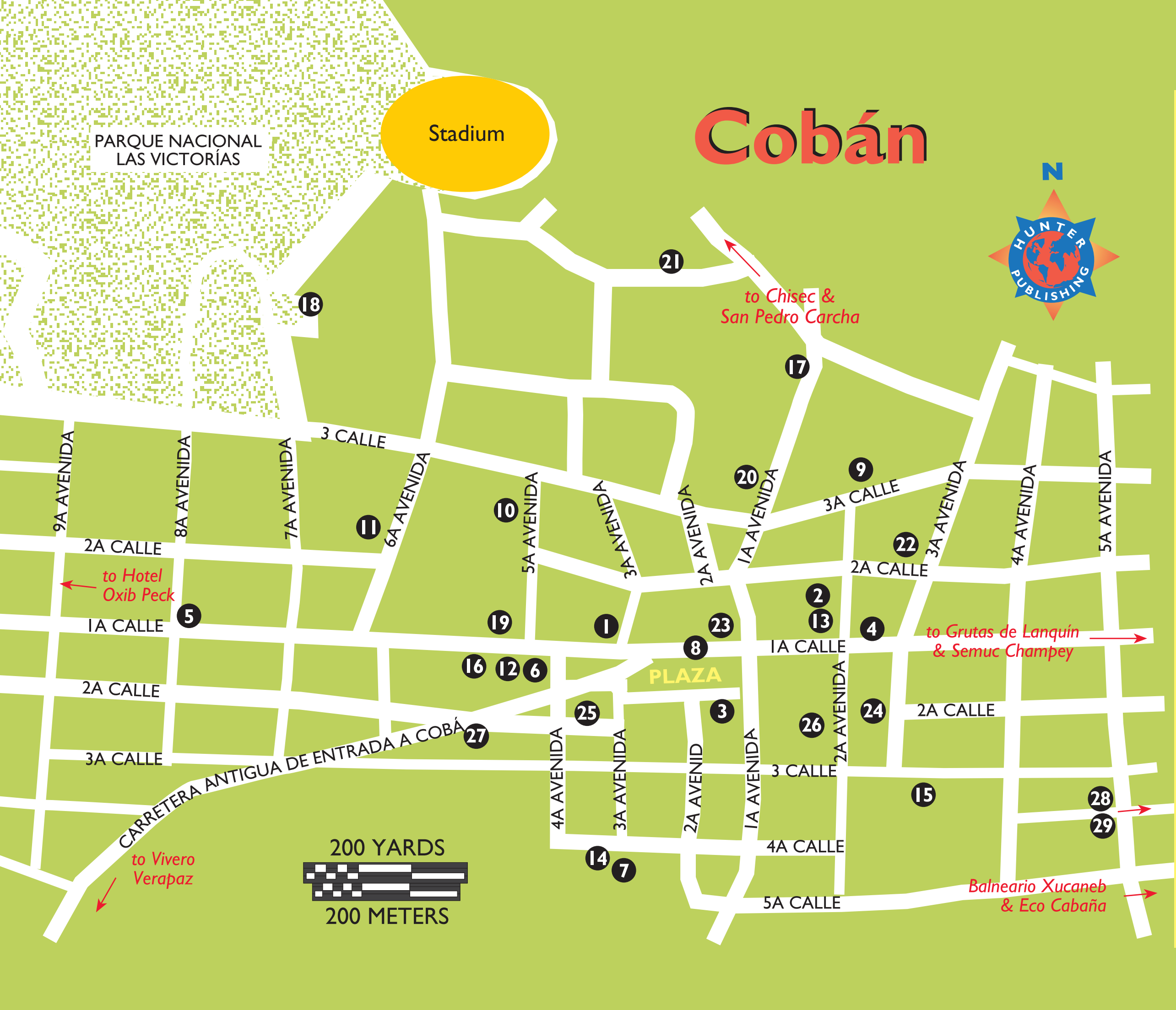
The plants are spread out on three levels and interspersed with other flowering shrubs and plants, including coffee. This is a nice way to spend an afternoon. Open 9 am-noon and 2-5 pm, Monday to Saturday. Admission is Q10 per person and includes a guided tour in English, German or Spanish.

Miniature orchid

GETTING HERE: *You can walk from town along the highway, but it's not very pleasant or safe. Take a taxi from the Central Plaza for Q10.*

Finca Margarita, 3a Calle 4-12, Zone 2, ☎ 502/5-951-3067. In 1888 Erwin Paul Dieseldorff came to Cobán and bought land a few blocks from the Central Plaza. While he was building his coffee plantation, he lived with the Rabinal Maya and learned their languages and customs. Over time, he became an expert on Maya archeology, folklore and herbal medicine and gathered an incredible number of Maya artifacts. His collection is now on display in Guatemala City in the National Museum of Archeology & History. Dieseldorff ran his plantations on the feudal system of debt patronage that kept many of his Indian friends

Cobán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WHERE TO EAT

1. Café El Tirol
2. Restaurante El Refugio
3. Café Santa Rita
4. La Esperanza Restaurante
5. Kam-mun
6. Café Posada
7. Café d'Acuña
8. Kam-mum

WHERE TO STAY

9. Hotel de Don Juan Matalbatz
10. Hotel Mansión Armenia
11. Hotel La Paz
12. Hotel La Posada
13. Hotel Central
14. Casa d'Acuña
15. Hostal de Doña Victoria
16. Pensión Monja Blanca
17. Posada de Carlos V

● SIGHTS & BUS STOPS

18. Templo El Calvario & Parque Nacional Las Victorias
19. Bus Terminal
20. Oficina Belenju; Buses to Lanquín
21. Bus to Chisec
22. Buses to San Pedro
23. Town Hall (Municipalidad)
24. Buses to Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas & Sayaxché; Playa Grande (Cantabal)
25. Buses to Cahabón & Lanquin
26. Central Market
27. Finca Santa Margarita Coffee Tour
28. Museo El Principe Maya
29. Muq'b'ilb'e School

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virtual slaves. When he died, his son took over the business and it remains a working *finca*, albeit with better working conditions. The downtown *finca* offers a one-hour tour that winds through the farm and shows all the stages of coffee production. At the end, gourmet coffee is offered in fine china and you can purchase a pound or two at wholesale prices. This is a delightful way to pass a few hours and the Maya tour guides are charming. Open 8 am-12:30 and 1:30-5 pm, Monday to Friday; mornings only on Saturdays. Admission is Q15.

ADVENTURES ON FOOT

LANQUÍN NATIONAL PARK/GROTTOES

Lanquín National Park covers 11 hectares and encompasses the village of Lanquín, the Caves of Lanquín and Semuc Champey along Rió Cahabón.

Lanquín is a small town 40 miles (64 km) west of Cobán. The town's cathedral has a façade dating to 1580 and its original altar from 1602, in addition to other religious relics dating from that period. The nearby market was constructed on the remains of the original church. **ALDECI Artisans Center** is located here. The Community Development Association of Lanquin (ALDECI) first started making hats from kalá palm. Now, they bags as well and also package local spices – cardamom, coffee and incredible dark chocolate. You can buy their products in the local hotels and at the Visitors Center in Semuc Champey. For more information, contact Yuri Lemus, ☎ 502/7-983-0092.

Cave entrance

The Río Lanquín flows nearby and just outside town is a series of subterranean caves that have a series of incredible stalactite and stalagmite formations. Inside one of the caves are some ancient Maya altars that are still used today. Go into the caves at dusk and you will see bats assembling for their night visit to the river (a good swimming spot) – it's an impressive sight. Open 8 am-4 pm, but you can request that the caves stay open to see the bats. Admission is Q10. Camping is permitted here for an additional Q10 fee.

> **NOTE:** The caves have some lights, but electricity is unreliable so bring your own flashlight. Don't go too far in unless you are an experienced spelunker – these caves haven't been fully explored.

About six miles (10 km) southeast of Lanquín, **Semuc Champey** (Q'ecqhi for Sacred Waters) is the area's most famous attraction – and for good reason. This natural limestone bridge was created by the Río Cahabob thundering into a cave, eventually wearing the rock down into a 984-foot (300-meter) natural limestone bridge. Even more extraordinary is the natural staircase that has formed so the water now flows down over the steps to forms small pools and lagoons before cascading into a waterfall. Rich in calcium carbonate, the water is a lovely turquoise. The effect is quite extraordinary. Many consider this the country's most beautiful tourist attraction and locals often refer to it as the eighth wonder of the world. There are many idyllic spots along here to swim or relax by the river. You can walk along the bridge (take care not to slip) and look down into the pools. The site is breathtaking and worth the dreary haul to get there.

Tourist services include a visitor's center with bathrooms, a restaurant serving lunch and lockers for rent. There is no camping at the site, but there is a private campground just outside the entrance that charges Q35 per tent. Admission to the falls is Q30 per person. For more information, visit www.semucchampey.com.

Semuc Champey

WARNING: Don't leave any belongings unattended at Semuc. Local gangs of boys have been known to wait in hiding until you are in the water to come out and steal your belongings. The tourist center now offers lockers for rent. Even better, leave your valuables behind.

GETTING HERE: *On a normal road this trip would take about 1½ hours. But depending on the time of year, the road may been in poor condition so it can take up to four hours to travel the 38 miles (62 km) from Cobán. Taking a tour will make things easier. Day tours from Cobán start at US$ 40 per person. Let your guide know if you want to stay overnight in Lanquín (as little as $40 per person), which gives you a more leisurely visit and a chance to recover from the journey. If you're traveling independently, you will need to hitch a ride from the caves to the lagoons. There is plenty of truck traffic on the highway and catching a ride isn't*

> *difficult. You can also hire a taxi or truck in Lanquín. They charge Q120 for drop-off and pick-up. Again, taking a tour will be easier.*

Where to Stay Near Lanquín National Park

The best hotels are located close to Semuc Champey. They get progressively more deary the closer you get to town.

Posada El Zapote, *3 km before Semuc Champey, ☎ 502/7-861-2639/40/41, 10 beds, $.* Everything is communal here, with shared dormitory-style rooms and restaurant. It's a lovely spot, and a great place to hook up with transportation heading out of the area.

Posada Las Marías, *¼ mile before Semuc Champey, ☎ 502/7-861-2209/10, www.posadalasmarias.com, 8 rooms, $$.* This rustic wooden hotel surrounded by lush vegetation offers private rooms with bath or shared dormitories. There is an excellent restaurant and live marimba music on weekends. The hotel has a number of planned activities, including bonfires, rope swings, inner tube rentals and transportation service for guests.

Hospedaje Lodge El Retiro, *1 km downhill from the crossroads at the entrance to town, ☎ 502/7-983-0009, 25 rooms, $.* Located on the banks of the Lanquín River, this small guest home has dorm rooms with shared bath for Q30 per person. The Fat Frog restaurant offers a varied menu, including Mexican and Guatemalan fare.

Hotel El Recreo, *300 ft before entering Lanquín coming from Cobán, ☎ 502/7-983-0056/7, 5 rooms, $.* This small hotel has some shared rooms with shared baths and one private room with private bath.

Hotel El Centro, *off center park in Lanquín, ☎ 502/7-983-0059, 6 rooms, $.* This very basic hotel has private rooms with bath.

Hotel Rabin Itzam, *at the main crossroads, ☎ 502/7-983-0076, 9 rooms, $.* This slightly seedy pink hotels offers shared rooms with a shared bath and some private rooms with a private bath.

LANQUIN TOUR COMPANIES

A number of companies in Cobán offer either transportation services or guided tours to Lanquín.

Hotel Doña Victoria, 3 Calle 2-38, Zona 3, ☎ 502/7-951-4213.

Casa d'Acuña, 4a Calle 3-11, Zona 2, ☎ 502/7-951-0482, fax 502/952-1547.

Aventuras Turisticas, 1a Calle 3-25, Zona 1 or 3a Calle, Zone 3, ☎ 502/7-951-4213 or 4214, www.aventurasturisticas.com.

CAQUIPEC CLOUD FOREST TREK

Proyecto Eco-Quetzal (PEQ), 2a Calle 14-36, Zona 1, Cobán, ☎ 502/7-952-1047, www.ecoquetzal.org. This 10-year old NGO (non-governmental organization) has been working with the Q'eqchi Maya in the mountains of Guacax, Caquipec, and Yalijux bordering on the Sierra de las Minas. PEQ takes tourists to remote areas of the rainforest accessible only on foot, where they can participate in Q'eqchi daily life. At 8,202 feet (2,500 meters) above sea level, this area is extremely poor. The program has helped to generate income.

Visitors stay with a typical family to experience the life and culture of the indigenous Maya Q'eqchi'. Homes are very rustic, with wooden walls and a dirt floor. Cooking is done over an open fire inside. You'll also be taken on guided tours throughout the area to bird watch, explore caves and learn about the forest. You can choose between the village of Chicacnab, in the high altitude cloud forests, or Rokjá Pomtilá, in the sub-tropical rainforest.

Cloud forest

Remote **Chicacnab** is a Q'eqchí community that sits at 7,874 feet (2,400 meters) in the mountains of Caquipec. The climate here is generally cold and wet. There is no electricity. Steep paths lead through farmland to the pristine cloud forest. This area has the highest density of Quetzals in Guatemala, as well as scores of other birds, such as mountain trogons, highland guans and emerald toucans. The forest is also home to kinkajous, wild boar and howler monkeys, as well as the highly endangered jaguar. Trees here are swathed in mosses, ferns, bromeliads and orchids. If you stay for more than one night, you'll have time to visit the biological station, the Mirador, and a ceremonial cave in the forest.

Paths above the community allow fantastic views across many mountain ranges.

Another Q'eqchí-speaking village, **Rokjá Pomtilá** sits on the banks of the Ik'bolay river. Families here clear land for corn crops and grow cardamom beneath the forest canopy. This area is home to a number of bird and plant species, including parrot, parakeet, toucan, and guan, as well as bromeliads, vines, orchids, palms, tree ferns, and a variety of tropical flowers. You may glimpse the howler monkeys and jaguars that inhabit this area. Other highlights include an ancient Maya burial site known as the Sacred Cave, with sparkling white formations, as well as lakes and waterfalls along the river. Your guide will take you for river tours in dugout canoes or hikes through the forest.

HIKE TO SACHICHAJ WATERFALL

Located in the virgin forest just outside of Cobán, this is a great trip for a picnic and swim. A 49-foot (15-meter) waterfall cascades from a cave into a turquoise lagoon. While you can visit independently, a guide is recommended so you don't get lost in the maze of paths. Tours are offered at **Hotel Doña Victoria**, 3 Calle 2-38 Zona 3, ☎ 502/7-951-4213, and **Casa d'Acuña**, 4a Calle 3-11, Zona 2, ☎ 502/7-951-0482, fax 502/952-1547.

ADVENTURES ON WATER

WHITEWATER RAFTING ON RÍO CAHABON

Río Cahabon is one of the largest rivers in Alta Verapaz. It starts north of the Caquipec mountain range and travels down to empty into Lake Izabal. This river has waterfalls, emerald lagoons and Class III-IV rapids that run through grottoes and natural hot water springs. The dense forest is home to a variety of birds, including toucans, parrots and herons.

5-Day/4-Night Extreme Adventure: This trip starts in Guatemala City and takes you to Río Lanquín, where rafts are waiting. The next three days are filled with intense rafting through a series of rapids and lagoons, stopping in the evenings to camp on the shore. On Day Four you visit the beautiful but remote Casacade de Chulac, where the whitewater rapids are tackled. You emerge at the small village of Cahaboncito. The last day is spent exploring the Lake Izabal/Río Dulce area. Price is US $395 per person and includes all transportation, accommodations, food, entrance fees, river and safety equipment, and professional US-trained river guides.

3-Day/2-Night Moderate Adventure: This trip is a scaled down version of the extreme adventure. Day One is spent exploring Cobán and the surrounding area. Day Two you travel to Río Lanquín and navigate the rapids as far as the village of Tamax. You return via truck to

Lanquín for an overnight stay. Day Three takes you to Semuc Champey and then back to Cobán. Price is US $265 per person and it includes all transportation, accommodation, breakfasts and lunch on the river, entrance fee to Semuc Champey, all river and safety equipment, and professional US-trained river guides.

Río Cahabon

OPERATOR

Maya Expeditions, 5 Calle A 14-07, Zona 10, Guatemala City, ☎ 502/2-363-4955, fax 502/2-368-1248, www.mayaexpeditions.com, offers two exciting whitewater trips along this mighty river.

CULTURAL ADVENTURES – MAYA VILLAGES

SAN JUAN CHAMELCO

Chamelco is only 10 miles (16 km) from Cobán and is the largest traditional Q'eqchí Maya village in the area. The women wear traditional *huipiles* and drape themselves with antique coins tied to red strings. The focal point of this village is the colonial church, **Iglesia San Juan**, dating back to the 16th century, with its rather incongruous Hapsburg double eagle on the front. The belfry sports the original church bell, which was donated to their leader Juan Maralbatz in 1548 by the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. There is an interesting little market here as well.

GETTING HERE: *Buses leave from Cobán every 15 minutes at the corner of 5 Av and 4 Calle, Zona 3. Tickets are Q1. A taxi to Chamelco will run Q50.*

TATIC VILLAGE

Tatic is a traditional Poqomchi' village 8½ miles (14 km) south of Cobán. It is famous for its Living Well (*Pozo Viva*) at the northern edge of the highway. This small stream appears stagnant until you walk closer and see the mysterious swirl in the water. the current from an underground river makes the spring bubble. Of course, the legendary explanation is far more interesting.

THE LOVERS OF POZO VIVA

Shortly after the Spanish Conquistadors arrived, the Pokomchí King had a beautiful daughter who liked to frolic in the waters of Río Cahabon. A young Spanish soldier spotted her and stepped out onto the riverbank. They fell in love and ran into each other's arms. His men came upon the two young lovers and wanted to rape the young girl. The dashing young soldier defended her to his death. The Maya then came upon the scene and the soldiers fled. When the princess' father heard what his daughter had done, he sentenced her to death unless she married a local suitor. She refused and, instead, chose to leap to her death into a bottomless ravine that filled with water the very next day, creating Pozo Viva. It is said that on a moonlight eve you can see the young lovers embracing by the water.

Tatic also has a miracle Jesus in **Iglesia Chi'Ixim**. The colonial church is set high on a hill and has a spectacular view of the surrounding countryside. The interior walls are covered with plaques and cards thanking El Señor de Chi'Ixim. Beside the church are **mosaics** painted by the late Pokomchí Shaman Jésus Lopez. You will have to ask permission of the priest at this church to view these paintings, which are considered sacred. The village **market** on Thursdays has some lovely handicrafts.

GETTING HERE: *Buses to Tatic leave Cobán every 20 minutes from the new bus station by the Stadium and Victoria Park. Tickets are Q2.50.*

Where to Stay in Tatic

Chi'Ixim Eco-hotel, *Km 183, Carretera a Cobán, ☎ 502/7-953-9198, 8 rooms, $*. This small eco-lodge has attractive bungalows equipped with kitchens, private baths and two double beds on grounds covered with trees and flowering plants. The only drawback is that it is right by the highway, so it can be loud.

SAN CRISTÓBAL VERAPAZ

San Cristóbal, 12.4 miles (20 km) west of Cobán, is a traditional rural Pokomchí village on the banks of Chichoj and Petencito lakes. It's surrounded by fields of coffee and sugar cane. The name Chichoj translates into, "mouth of the mouse." The whole area was declared a wildlife reserve so there are plenty of areas to hike and bird watch in the nearby Parque El Petencito.

Language courses are offered at **AJ Chi'Cho Centro Linguistica**, 0 Calle 0-33 Calle del Calvario, Zona 3, ☎ 502/7-950-4039, www.ajchicho.50g.com. The US $120 weekly fee includes 25 hours of instruction and lodging with a Pokomchi family. Field trips include visits to nearby Pokomchi communities, nature walks and a chance to participate in community activities.

The Pokomchí have a strong tradition of **massage and sauna** using aromatic herbs in combination with *temascal*, a sauna used to purify both body and soul. To have a session with one of the local healers, contact Lourdes Coy, ☎ 502/7-950-4130, for an appointment.

Situated on the outskirts of town on top of a hill, the **Pan Kinich Chapel** is the spiritual center of the Pokomchi. Many Maya ritual and ceremonies are performed by the Sacradotes here. When you visit, take care not to interrupt the ceremonies and don't take any photos.

Museum Katinamit, Calle de Calvario, ☎ 502/7-950-4039. This darling little museum is set in an old adobe house. It has re-created a typical Pokomchí house with typical household items and products. An interesting side trip. Open 8 am-5 pm, Monday-Saturday; 9 am-noon, Sunday. Admission is Q5.

El Calvario Church, constructed in 1652, is one of the tallest churches in Las Verapaces. The lush flower garden with a beautiful statue of the Virgin Mary has an incredible view to Laguna Chichoj. The church has been entirely decorated by local artisans and is a perfect example of the blend of Maya pagan beliefs with Christianity. During Semana Santa (Holy Week), a sawdust prayer mat is created that extends down the . 62-mile (one-km) road to the center of town.

El Mercado, alongside the church, is housed in a two-story building. The market has a number of stalls selling fruits and vegetables, along with beautiful products made by local artisans. This area is well known for its handmade leather goods, paper and candles. The women of the region are famous for their beautiful weaving of flowers, plants and abstract figures, as well as for their baskets and purses woven from maguey. You can also find paintings and ceramics created by artists in nearby villages. The main market days are Thursday and Sunday.

Chixoy Dam is one of the largest hydroelectric plants in Central America. Its reservoir can hold 460 million cubic meters and its machine house has five turbines. It make look tranquil now, but it was the scene of a human rights violation that is just coming to light. Some 3,500 residents were forcibly evicted from the area and 6,000 households in the region suffered losses from the construction of the dam and reservoir. In the early 1980s, it was the scene of a terrible massacre where half the population of Río Negro, one of the dam-affected communities, was killed because of their opposition to resettlement.

Vivero Antonio Ruiz botanical garden and nursery just 10 minutes outside of town is owned by Antonio Ruiz. It produces ornamental cacti and creepers/climbing plants that are exported throughout the world. There is also a small coffee plantation on the grounds. You have to make an appointment first. Try contacting the Spanish school J Chi'Cho Centro Linguistica Direccion, 0 Calle 0-33 Calle del Calvario, Zona 3, San Cristobal Verapaz, ☎ 502/7-950-40-39, info@cecep.org, before heading out and ask if they can help make arrangements for you.

Marimba Factory, 0 Calle, Calle Calvario, Barrio San Sebastian, ☎ 502/7-950-4198. The Galvez brothers are famous for their marimbas, the national instrument of Guatemala. You can take a free tour of the factory and see how these instruments are created.

Where to Stay in San Cristóbal

There's not much in the way of luxury digs in the area, but the hotels are comfortable, with plenty of hot water. The service is very friendly.

Park Hotel Resort and Convention Center, *Km 196.5 Carretera a Cobán, ☎ 502/7-952-0807 or 0809 or 0831, www.parkhotelresort.com, 96 rooms, $$$.* This is the most luxurious resort in the area, complete with a convention center, botanical garden, pool, gymnasium, small zoo and playground. The ultra-modern rooms have cable TV, comfortable beds, wrought-iron furniture and decorated with in soft pastel colors. Bathrooms have plenty of hot water.

El Porton Real, *4a Av, 1-44, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-950-4604, 12 rooms, $.* This former house has been turned into a family hotel with shared or private rooms that are decorated with local textiles. There is plenty of hot water and free parking.

Hostel Nuboso, *Pamuc Village, ☎ 502/7-908-7682, 2 rooms, $.* Located in the nearby community of Pamuc, Nuboso offers you a chance to live with a Pokomchí family and enjoy typical food of the region. You can participate in tortilla-making lessons or try weaving baskets from maguey. The hostel sits on the edge of the cloud forest and you can take to a hiking trail where you may see the famous Quetzal bird or you can explore caves along Río Chixoy. The two large rooms have private baths.

Hotel y Cafeteria El Manantial, *5Av, Barrio San Felipe, Zona 4, ☎ 502/7-808-3763, 12 rooms, $.* Situated on the shore of Lake Chichoj, this homey hotel offers some lovely views. Rooms are simply furnished with cable TV and private bathroom with hot water. The restaurant is one of the best places to eat and serves regional dishes.

WHERE TO STAY

There are plenty of budget hotels in Cobán, but watch out for damp and cold in the low-budget hotels. Many incredible mid-range hotels have a great atmosphere and character.

Hotel La Posada, *Calle 4-12, Zona 2, ☎ 502/7-952-1495, fax 502/7-951-0646, 14 rooms, $$.* This is the most artistic hotel in Cobán. The converted colonial home is furnished with lovely antiques and Guatemalan art. Rooms have four-poster beds, fireplaces and private baths and are set around two courtyards filled with flowers and little nooks with chairs and hammocks. The atmosphere is both luxurious and relaxed. There is an excellent restaurant and café, Café Posada (see page 280).

HOTEL PRICE CHART

Prices are per person

$	under US $25
$$	US $26-50
$$$	US $51-85
$$$$	US $86-125
$$$$$	over US $125

Hotel Central, *1a Calle 1-79, Zona 4, ☎/fax 502/7-952-1442, 14 rooms, $$*. This establishment resembles a European pension with its décor and European meal plan. There is a very cheery little courtyard garden, but the rooms are dark and slightly claustrophobic. Bathrooms are terrific and have lots of hot water.

Pension Monja Blanca, *1C 2-33, Zona 4, ☎ 502/7-951-1900 or 0531, $$*. This is another colonial home converted into a guesthouse. Its rooms are charmingly old-fashioned and have good beds, antique furniture and private baths. A courtyard is filled with many kinds of flowers and trees. The pension is a quiet oasis in the center of town.

Hotel Doña Victoria, *3 Calle 2-38, Zona 3, ☎ 502/7-951-4213, 8 rooms, $$*. This hotel oozes historical charm. Over 400 years old, it was one of the first buildings in Cobán built by Dominican monks for their cloistered nuns. The old tunnel that connected the convent to the church is now a bar. A wealthy family bought the property as a bridal home for their daughter. Unfortunately, she was jilted at the altar and withdrew from society. For over 20 years she ran a candle factory inside her home and customers came to pick up their orders. The garden here is over 200 years old and has banana trees, coffee plants and tropical flowers. The bright rooms have their original furniture from the 18th century and are simply furnished with double or single beds. Be sure to try the restaurant (see below).

Casa d'Acuña, *4a Calle 3-11, Zona 2, ☎ 502/7-951-0482, fax 502/952-1547, 7 rooms, $*. This lovely European-style pension is located down the steep hill in town. Rooms have bunk beds with a shared bath, so there isn't much privacy. There is one private room. La Casa has a great restaurant and a wonderful bulletin board with tons of valuable information. The hotel offers a variety of tours, including one to Semuc Champey and another to the Candelería caves.

Hotel de Don Juan Matalbatz, *3a Calle 1-46, Zona 1, ☎/fax 502/7-952-1599, 15 rooms, $.* Rooms are large, clean and come with cable TV and private baths with hot water. Shared rooms are also available and have little balconies with street views. The courtyard is pleasing. Check your room before signing in since some smell like mildew. Hotel de Don Juan features a large on-site pool table and a good restaurant. No credit cards.

© Hotel Doña Victoria

Hotel La Paz, *6 Av 2-19, ☎ 502/7-952-1358, 28 rooms, $.* La Paz is cheap and cheerful. Rooms are clean and airy and all baths are shared (hot water runs out quickly). There is parking and a good cafeteria next door. No credit cards.

Hotel Oxib Peck, *3a Calle 12-11, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-951-1039, fax 502/7-951-3224, 13 rooms, $.* Set 20 minutes from downtown and closer to Parque Victorias, this hotel has a nice courtyard with a small aviary that houses some cheeky parrots. Rooms are clean and agreeable with double beds, private baths and TV.

Hotel Mansion Armenia, *7a Av 2-18, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-952-2284, 23 rooms, $.* Another hotel tucked away from downtown, Armenia is close to El Calvario and Parque Victorias. It's clean, quiet and modern. Rooms have private baths and cable TV, and there's parking and a cafeteria. No credit cards.

Hotel Posada de Carlos V, *1a Av 3-44, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-951-3501 or 3502, 14 rooms, $.* A long name for a small hotel. The building has a chalet style, with lots of pine trim and crisp décor. Rooms are clean and functional, with private baths and cable TV. The lobby has some great photos of the old Cobán. No credit cards.

Hotel Oxib Peck

Posada y Balneario Xucaneb, *3.7 miles (6 km) outside Cobán, Km 218 on the road to San Juan Chamelco, ☎ 502/7-952-3415, 7 rooms, $.* This is the place to come if you want complete tranquility. It's located on a natural pond that has great swimming. The grounds are lovely. While rooms are not luxurious, they are clean and comfortable and most contain three beds. Bathrooms have hot water, but little in the way of décor. An upstairs dining room can provide meals as long as you ask ahead of time. Also available on request is a sauna.

WHERE TO EAT

© Hotel Oxib Peck

Cobán has a wonderful mixture of basic *comedores* and European-style cafés. Nothing is outrageously expensive. For a bargain meal, check out the street vendors that come out after the market closes. They sell great steamed corn, tortillas and barbecued meats.

Casa d'Acuña, *4a Calle 3-11, Zona 2, ☎ 502/7-951-0482, fax 502/952-1547.* Café d'Acuña is, without a doubt, the best restaurant in Cobán. Set in a lovely colonial courtyard, the café offers crisp delicious salads, tasty quiches, fresh pasta dishes and excellent daily specials that include soup and salad. Save room for something from the cake cabinet, full of sinfully delicious cakes and pastries. US $3-9.

Hotel Doña Victoria, *3 Calle 2-38, Zona 3, ☎ 502/7-951-4213.* The restaurant in this historical home looks out onto a 200-year-old courtyard garden. The menu offers good chicken dishes along with fresh pastas and salads. The bar is really cool – it used to be the tunnel used by the nuns for going over to the church. Q15-35.

Café Posada, *located in Hotel La Posada, Calle 4-12, Zona 2.* This is actually two restaurants. The café outside overlooks the plaza and serves coffees, teas and pastries. You can eat your meal in one of the sitting rooms that have couches and fireplaces. The main dining room is very refined and decorated with art to the point of distraction. The menu includes meat, chicken, fish, pizza and pasta. It's a tad overpriced, but the atmosphere can't be beat. Q25-95.

Café Tirol, *1a Calle 3-13, Zona 1.* Café Tirol offers over 22 different kinds of coffee, so it's hard to make a decision. The pastries are good, and light breakfasts and lunches include pancakes, eggs and sandwiches. Q7-14. No credit cards.

La Esperanza Restaurante, *Calle 1, Zona 1.* This is *the* place to come for breakfast. Downstairs there is a bakery and upstairs is where you go to enjoy the goodies. There are several good breakfasts offered and the coffee is heavenly. Breakfast finishes at 10:30 am, so come early. Q7-20. No credit cards.

El Refugio, *2a Calle y 2 Av, Zona 4.* Set on a hilltop overlooking the street and with plenty of rustic décor, this restaurant serves wonderful steaks and fresh game, such as veal and fish. The soups are excellent (but avoid the turtle soup, since turtles are on the endangered species list). Q15-35. No credit cards.

Café Santa Rita, *south side of the park.* This little café serves bang-up breakfasts. You have plenty of choices. Have some eggs served with beans and coffee. Or try the *mosh*, a spiced oatmeal with cream. Lunch and dinner dishes are traditional, such as *chile rellano* (stuffed chiles) or *tortas*. They have good desserts and coffee, too. Q4-9. No credit cards.

Kam-mun, *1a Calle 8- 2, Zona 2.* This large restaurant has an outside patio. It serves yummy Chinese food – the egg rolls, sweet and sour chicken and won-ton soup are delicious. Portions are large, presumably to justify the slightly high prices. Q42-70. No credit cards.

CHISEC

Located in the northern part of Alta Verapaz, Chisec forms part of the **Northern Traverse Route** (Franja Transversal del Norte). This huge territory stretches west to Ixcán in the department of Quiché, north to Sayaxché in El Petén, south to Cobán and east to Fray Bartolomé de las Casas. It is even more remote than El Petén or the Cuchunatan mountains area. Before the *franja* was built in 1972 for oil exploration, this area was virtually inaccessible.

Chisec is the main city and it's quickly becoming the jumping-off point for travelers to explore the cave and river systems. Eighteen rivers flow in and out of this area through a series of limestone karsts connected to four different mountain ranges. Eco-tourism is playing an important role in local economy as residents are returning to build their lives after the destruction caused by the civil war.

The local organization **SANK** (Saaq'Aach'ool Nimla K'aleb'al), Café La Huelle, Calle Principale, ☎ 502/7-933-8136, www.visitchisec.com, runs the local tourism office and can help you make arrangements for any of the adventure tours listed below. "Sank" is the Maya word for the worker ant and sums up the spirit of this organization intent on rebuilding the community.

There are three exciting areas to explore – B'omb'il Pek, Sepalau Lagoon and Cuevas de Candelería

Church, Chisec

ADVENTURES ON FOOT

PAINTED ROCK (CUEVAS B'OMB'IL PEK)

In 2001 two incredible caves were found 1.86 miles (three km) north of Chisec in the remote Q'ecqhi village of **Povernir II**. A 4,921-foot (1,500-meter) trail leading to the caves has been created by the B'omb'il Pek Association of El Porvenir II. Ropes and repelling equipment have been installed at the entrance of the first cave of this extensive system that supposedly extends all the way to the San Antonio Caves in Alta Verapaz (Cuevas Candelería). The first cave has a huge opening leading to a canyon. The cathedral-like cavern has countless corridors with natural windows that illuminate fantastic stalactite and stalagmite formations. One of the smaller caves measures just 3.2 feet (one meter) wide and has primitive paintings of monkeys and jaguars. How they were painted so far up the wall remains a mystery. Many of the caves are littered with mono- and poly-chromatic Maya pottery. Unfortunately, there are signs of looting.

The smaller Jul'Ik cave (Cave of Air) is also filled with broken Maya pottery and several large holes in the ceiling indicate more looting. This cave is still used by local Q'eqchí for religious ceremonies. A path outside the caves leads to a small archeological site with a palace and a ball court. Small mounds nearby are believed to be tombs. The site and paintings have been identified as belonging to the Classic period (AD 200-800).

Lanterns, boots and helmets can be rented at the reception center at the beginning of the trail, alongside the highway. You must hire a community guide in order to explore the caves. A guided tour of both caves costs Q40.

> GETTING HERE: *B'omb'il Pek and Lagunas Sepalau (below) are close to Chisec and a full tour of both takes a day. You can reach Chisec by bus from Cobán to Raxrujá. Chisec is 15.6 miles (25 km) before Raxrujá. For the caves, get off at the San Simón II bridge and walk 30 minutes to the caves. There is a sign showing the way.*

CUEVAS DE CANDELERÍA

Río Candelería passes underground through the mountains and has created a series of subterranean grottos known as the Grutas San Antonio or Cuevas de Candelería. They are located in a remote part of northern Alta Verapaz, between the towns of Chisec and Raxrujá. The main cavern is monumental, reaching 98 feet (30 meters) wide and 656 feet (200 meters) high; some stalagmites in the caves measure 196 feet (60 meters).Natural windows along the roof of the gallery let light flow down along the walls, creating an ethereal effect.

These caves have been sacred to the Q'eqchí Maya since ancient times and some have carved ladders and manmade platforms. Because the area is threatened by logging companies, a number of international organizations are working with locals to promote eco-tourism. The caves have been declared a protected site and are being fsine

monitored by Complejo Turístico Cuevas de Candelaria, the organization who made the first scientific explorations of the site in 1972.

GETTING HERE: *This trip involves a series of bus rides. First you must get on a bus heading to the village of Raxrujá. Several bus lines and colectivos have regular service from Cobán, but the roads are really rough. Ask the driver to drop you at the bridge that goes over Río Candelaria, 12½ miles (20 km) from Chisec and walk 1¼ miles (two km) to the Cooperativa Sechaj. You can hire a guide here for the first series of caves. Entrance to the caves is Q25 and a tour guide costs Q25. Guides are fluent only in Spanish and French.*

You can also explore the caves by boat, which may be a better option since many of the caves are inaccessible on foot. The tour arranged at the science station, where the Complejo Turistico Cuevas does their research, costs Q250 for a two-day/one-night tour. The fee covers everything but food.

CUEVAS DE CANDELERIA TOUR COMPANIES

Two companies offer guided tours to these caves, but both are expensive. You can arrange your own tour, but only if you speak Spanish.

Hostal d'Acuña, Calle 4 3-17, Zona 2, Cobán, ☎ 502/7-952-1547, runs a two-day/one-night tour leaving from Cobán for US $270 per person. Cost includes transportation, lodging, food, entrance fee and guide.

Maya Expeditions, 15 Calle 1-91, Zona 10, local 104, Guatemala City, ☎ 502/2-363-4955, fax 502/2-368-2368, www.mayaexpeditions.com, offers the Candelería Caves as part of their rafting trip on Río Candelería. Cost is US $600 per person.

CANCUÉN RUINS

The remains of an enormous Maya city on the same scale as Tikal have been uncovered along Río de la Pasión on the border between Alta Verapaz and El Petén. Although Cancuén (Serpent's Pit) was discovered in 1905, it was dismissed as a minor site. In the 1960s, Harvard graduate students discovered the palace but underestimated the size of this ancient city. In 1997, Dr Arthur Demarest visited and, after initial mapping, his team realized the area's scope and importance. It is now being hailed as the biggest archeological find in years.

This intriguing site doesn't contain the usual plazas and public areas. Instead, there is the grand palace covering 270,000 square feet (25,083 square meters). It has more than 170 rooms built around 11 courtyards and walls that are six feet (1.82 meters) thick in certain places. The courtyards are closed off and it appears only the elite were permitted entry. Demarest believes the palace was built by King, T'ah 'ak' Cha'an in the mid-eighth century. Another unusual feature are entombed artists found dressed up in the finery of kings with jade-embedded teeth and quetzal feathers. Close to the main palace one of several workshop areas contained a 35-pound chunk of jade used to create amulets and beads. Impressive quantities of pyrite were also found nearby.

Maya head discovered at Cancuén

Hieroglyphics have outlined a city with many alliances. There are references to officials from Calakmul in Mexico attending the inaugurations of two Cancuén kings between AD 656 and 677. Other inscriptions record the marriage of a Prince To K'in K'awil of Dos Pilas to the Cancún Princess, Ix Chac K'awil Ix Cancuén Ahau in AD 703.

CANCUÉN RUINS TOUR COMPANIES

Access to the Cancuén site is currently restricted and you have to book a tour through **SANK**, Café La Huelle, Calle Principale, ☎ 502/7-933-8136, www.visitchisec.com, which runs the local tourism office. Costs will involve hiring a boat, and you will be given a chance to observe the dig.

ADVENTURES ON WATER

SEPALAU LAGOONS

Four miles (seven km) from Chisec in virgin mountain rainforest is a series of exquisite natural lagoons named **Sepalau** (Place of the Sea). The name refers to the crystal-blue waters colored by the minerals from underground springs. The lagoons were opened as an eco-tourist site in March 2002 and are operated by the Sepalau Cataltzúl (Burnt Hill) community. A small reception area and birdwatching post are located at the first lagoon, which covers 5,381 square feet (500 square meters) andis nearly 295 feet (90 meters) deep. During rainy season, the lagoons join together and form part of the underground river that joins Río Chajmaíc. There is excellent bird- and animal-watching – jaguars, Dante's tapir, iguanas, parrots and toucans breed here. A number of nature trails go around the lagoons and there is a small boat for exploring. Swimming is permitted, but you must check first with the Sepalau Cataltúl community, owners of the lagoon (these waters serve as their main source of water and at certain times of the year swimming is not permitted).

The village of Sepalau Cataltzúl was abandoned in 1981 after being targeted by the Guatemalan army. Residents have gradually been returning to their home and rebuilding their lives. Today, it has 100 families.

Admission to the caves is Q25 and includes a guide (you may want to tip your guide, too).

> GETTING HERE: *B'omb'il Pek and Lagunas Sepalau are close to Chisec and a full tour of both takes a day. You can reach Chisec by bus from Cobán to Raxrujá. Chisec is 15 miles (25 km) before Raxrujá. Get off at Sepalau Cataltzúl. Up the hill, at the entrance to the lagoons, you can hire a guide. From there it is a 45-minute jungle hike to reach the lagoons.*

PARQUE NACIONAL LAGUNA LACHUA

So far north that it borders on the wilderness area of Ixcán, Lachua is incredibly beautiful. It sits 567 feet (173 meters) above sea level and is 728 feet (222 meters) deep. It is almost perfectly round. Situated in lush rainforest of mahogany and cedar trees, its waters are so full of calcium that trees falling into the lake are immediately fossilized and, when the lagoon empties in the dry season, strange calcium formations can be seen jutting up from the bottom. The name comes from the Q'eqchí for "fetid water," referring to the smell of sulfur. Geologists believe a meteorite crater may have formed the lake. The lake and surrounding 35,800 acres has been declared a national park to protect it from loggers and the encroaching cardamom plantations.

The park offers a number of activities. There's plenty of fish, and snorkeling and swimming are excellent. Jungle trails pass by the lairs of jaguars and howler monkeys. Nearby Río Chixoy can be explored by boat (available for rent, Q7 per hour). Upstream is El Peyan Canyon, a narrow passage with bizarre calcareous rock formations. Birding is also a favored activity.

You will have to stay overnight. There are several very lovely campsites from which to choose, as well as rustic cabins with mosquito netting. You must bring your own supplies and take your trash with you. Showers, toilets and barbecue areas are provided. The park has a capacity for 84 day visitors and 21 overnight visitors. Admission is Q40 per person and a guide costs Q30. Camping is Q20 and cabins go for Q60.

> GETTING HERE: *This is in a very remote area so the roads are primitive. Be patient. Catch a bus heading to Playa Grande,*

Ixcán. This 64-mile (103-km) ride will take between five to six hours. Tickets are Q35. Ask to be let off at the Cobán-Playa Grande crossroads and follow the sign to the park entrance (3.1 miles, five km). From there it is another 2.4-mile (four-km) hike to the lagoon.

WHERE TO STAY & EAT

IN CHISEC

There are three basic hotels in Chisec, and they all double as restaurants. None accepts credit cards.

La Estancia de la Virgén Hotel & Restaurant, *main road, ☎ 502/7-979-7748, 25 rooms, $.* This is the most modern hotel in town. Rooms are fairly spacious, with TV and private baths. There is a pool and a restaurant serving Guatemalan and international cuisine.

Los Nopales Hotel & Restaurant, *just off central park, no phone, 8 rooms, $.* This family run hotel has simple rooms with shared baths. The restaurant offers typical Guatemalan fare.

Elizabeth Budget Hotel & Restaurant, *main road, north of central park, no phone, 6 rooms, $.* The Elizabeth is a cute little hotel run by a friendly local family. Excellent food.

Cafeteria La Huella, *north of the park, ☎ 502/7-933-8136, $.* This is home to the local tourism office and Internet café. It has delicious pizza, burgers and pastas and is a great place to meet locals and pick up your emails.

NEAR CANDELERÍA

Candelería Eco-Lodge, right by the caves, was the camp built by the research team. It has well-equipped bungalows with kitchens, bathrooms and private gardens. Cost is US $50 per day, which includes incredible French cuisine and guides to the caves. You must make reservations two days in advance with Sergio Sierra, ☎ 502/5-710-8753.

In the nearby community of Muc'bilha, the **Tourism Complex Candelaria Caves Hotel & Restaurant** has very nice cabins with double beds, fan and private bath with hot water for Q320 per person.

NEAR LAGUNA LACHUA

Finca Chipantun, *4.3 miles (seven km) from park, www.geocities.com/chipantun/main.html.* This eco-lodge on the banks of Río Chixoy borders the park. It has been set up like a summer camp, with shared rooms and a variety of wonderful activities.

Guests stay in one of four cabins equipped with four single beds and mosquito nets. There is also a campground and room to hang a hammock. Meals are prepared using fruits and vegetables from the forest, as well as those from local farms. Fresh fish is caught daily in the lagoon. A variety of available activities include guided tours of the lagoon, horseback riding, jungle treks, river trips to El Peyan canyon, birding, swimming, kayaking and fishing. Prices are incredibly low. A complete package with three meals a day, lodging and all activities costs US $25 per person. To get here, take the same route as going to the park (see above), and ask to be let off at Finca.

El Petén

El Petén is considered Guatemala's last wilderness frontier, an area famous for lost Maya cities and impenetrable forests. It is a vast region encompassing rainforests, savannas, wetlands and archeological ruins. But like many wilderness areas, El Petén is under threat and is rapidly being deforested by a growing population and logging companies. Various multinationals have their eye on oil and other natural resources, while conservationists are working hard to save the area. Eco-tourism is seen as a viable alternative for the region.

Most of the settlers in El Petén are of mixed blood, or *Ladino*, and there is little of the indigenous culture found in other parts of the country.

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HISTORY

Once inhabited by several million people, **El Petén Valley** was the center of the **Maya** civilization for centuries. Researchers believe this area, known as the southern Maya lowlands (now Belize, northern Guatemala and eastern Mexico), had the densest population. It reached its gold4en era during the Late Classic period (AD 600-900). Between AD 650 and 930, various city-states, such as El Mirador, Tikal, Dos Pilas, Ceibal and Yaxhá, emerged from the jungle as mighty forces whose influence was felt as far north as Chichén Itzá in Mexico's Yucatán. The struggle for power spawned many wars and the chronicles of victories and defeat are recorded in the stelae on buildings, pyramids and staircases. Yet for all its power and wealth, the southern

© Dreamstime/Jesterlou

Grand tree in the Guatemalan rainforest

Maya lowlands area was deserted by AD 930. Theories continue to evolve with each new discovery and researchers believe this area may hold the answer to the mysterious disappearance of the civilization.

Overlooked for centuries, El Petén holds a lost kingdom that is only starting to come to light. During the 18th century, both **Spain** and **Britain** attempted logging in the Petén, but the remoteness and lack of roads made any real development difficult to maintain. Ninety percent of virgin rainforest remained until 1970. The civil war that raged from 1960 until 1996 actually helped preserve the area, since the rebels set up base camps in the Petén and discouraged anyone else from settling there. During the 1980s, the Guatemala government decided the Petén was the solution for the many displaced survivors of the war and encouraged homesteading by selling parcels of land for as little as Q175 (US $25). At the same time it allowed oil and logging companies to start building roads through forests. As a result, over 400,000 misplaced Guatemalans arrived to claim their piece of land. Today, half of the rainforest has been cut down by either logging companies, cattle barons or by settlers practicing slash-and-burn agriculture. All are devastating. This is not the Promised Land for settlers – the poor soil quality forces residents to hunt for survival. The end result has been a drastically reduced wildlife population. White-tailed deer, tepezcuintle (an agouti paca), jaguars and ocellated turkey are in danger of disappearing from El Petén.

© Dreamstime/Jesterlou

Calakmul Structure II, Mexico

In 1990, Mexico, Guatemala and Belize created the **Maya Biosphere Reserve**. Its five million acres include most of the northern Petén as well as the **Mexican Calakmul Biosphere** and the **Río Bravo Conservation Area** in Belize. In Guatemala, the Maya Biosphere is divided into three zones. The Core Zone Area is 4.7 million acres under absolute protection with no human settlements allowed. Visitors are permitted to visit only for eco-tours or to conduct research. Surrounding the Core Zone is the Multiple Use Zone, which allows the use of natural resources by oil and timber companies, as well as the local population. A nine-mile Buffer Zone separates the biosphere from the southern Petén. Most of the settlements, industry and agriculture are located in the Multiple Use Zone or Buffer Zone. The 1996 peace accord allowed the Guatemalan government to start focusing on conservation and **CONAP** (Consejo Nacional de Areas Protegidas – National Council of Protected Areas) was established to oversee the Maya Biosphere Reserve.

CONAP helped create an international conservation team known as Projecto Peténero para un Bosque Sostenible (ProPetén). Its main focus is working with local forest communities to develop cottage industries and eco-tours that bring income to the area. It is hoped these programs will reduce the locals' need to hunt or practice slash-and-burn farming. The success of the Scarlet Macaw Trail and El Mirador Trail (see pages 331 and 334) has encouraged locals to start up other eco-businesses. The revenue from park admission, guide fees, restaurants, eco-lodges and other services is starting to make a difference.

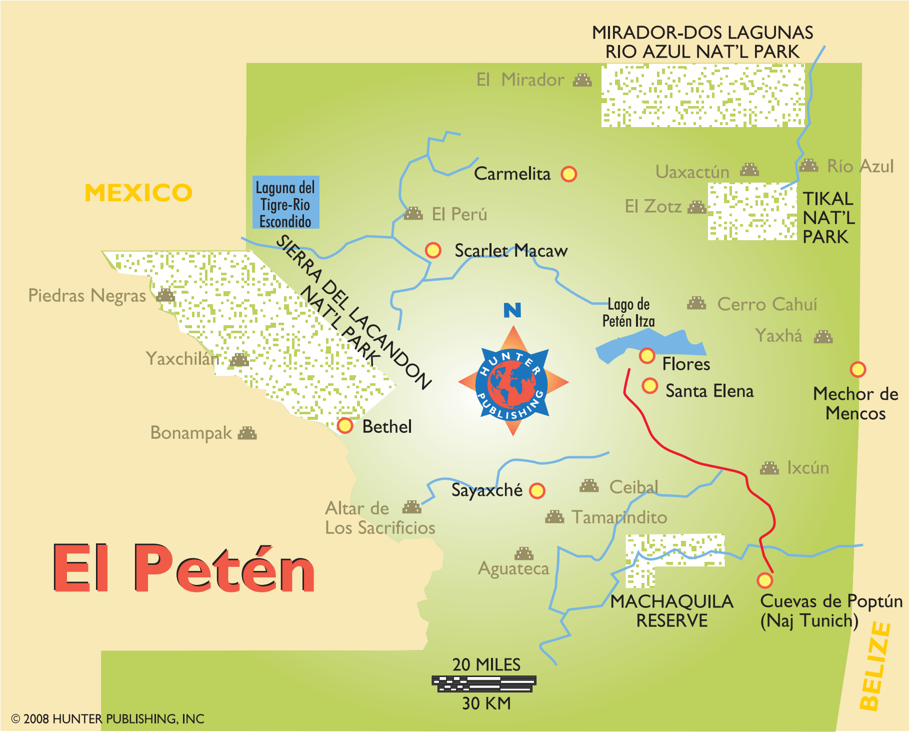
So, while El Petén still has a long way to go with some complex problems to be solved, the future looks promising.

FLORA & FAUNA

The region is considered subtropical with a warm and humid climate. Rainy season begins in May and lasts well into December with at least

150 days of rain during those months. Over 2,000 plant species have been identified here, along with six species of cedar and four species of palm trees. Fifty-four mammal species include the howler monkey, spider monkey, anteater, three-toed sloth, armadillo, brown coati, paca, ocelot, jaguarundi, jaguar, Baird's tapir, white-lipped peccary and white-tailed deer. Over 350 species of birds have been identified, among them the red macaw, scarlet macaw, jaribu stork, crested eagle, and ocellated turkey. There are nine families of amphibian, six of turtles, and 38 species of non-poisonous and poisonous snakes.

There is so much offered in the Petén that you could easily spend a few months exploring the whole region. Visiting involves sacrificing some of the luxuries, but the effort is worth it as this is a chance to explore true wilderness, see fantastic Maya ruins and meet some hardy pioneers.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El Mirador
Carmelita
Uaxactún
Río Azul
MEXICO
Laguna del Tigre-Rio Escondido
El Perú
El Zotz
TIKAL NAT'L PARK
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Cuevas de Poptún (Naj Tunich)
20 MILES
30 KM
BELIZE
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MELCHOR DE MENCOS

Melchor de Mencos is an unattractive, chaotic border town with little to offer the visitor. Its main highlight is the stelae from the ruins of El Naranjo on display in the central plaza. Melchor makes a poor introduction or exit to Guatemala and most tourists don't linger. Everyone makes sure their transportation is arranged to bypass the town once their business at the Guatemala-Belize border is finished.

It's unfortunate the introduction to this area is unpleasant. Away from the town are some fascinating ruins to explore, and the lush jungle offers excellent birdwatching and hiking. However, it is difficult to explore this area on your own, since most of the ruins are remote and require a guide. If you prefer to travel solo, take a trip to Yaxhá, just one hour from Melchor.

GETTING HERE & GETTING AROUND

BY BUS

If you are coming from Belize you will cross over from Benque Viejo into Melchor de Mencos. You will first have to pass through the Belizean customs, pay your US $10 exit fee and US $7.50 conservation tax before going through Guatemalan customs. Once you have finished at Guatemala customs, you get back on board your bus and continue across the bridge. Sometimes the bus is stopped and everyone is asked to pay a Q10 municipal tax. If you are crossing on foot you may be asked to pay more: some enterprising officials were charging US $10 fee. Watch your belongings when crossing the bridge, and be prepared to be approached by hordes of people who want to sell you something under the guise of being helpful.

Coming from the interior of Guatemala, you must first take a bus to Flores and then catch a local bus to Melchor. Buses leave every hour from Flores. Bus lines are Pinita Bus, leaving at 5, 8 and 10 am; and Rosita, leaving at 11 am, 3 and 6 pm. If you have four or more people you could also consider hiring a taxi. The cost would be Q300-400. Most tourist areas have a shuttle service that whisks you from Guatemala into Belize with no stopover in Melchor.

ADVENTURES ON FOOT

EXPLORING MAYA RUINS

Yaxhá-Nakúm-Naranjo Triangle

Starting 18 miles (28.9 km) east of the Belize-Guatemala border is a series of lagoons that stretch as far as Tikal, covering a total of 91,429 acres. During the rainy season the area floods and becomes a *bajos* (wetlands), with giant tracts of mud. These *bajos* make up 40% of the Petén landscape and archeologists believe the Maya may have used them as major agricultural zones. One of the largest seasonal wetlands is the **Bajo la Justa**, extending for 23 square miles (59.56 square km) southeast of Tikal. In the late 1990s, a group of researchers led by Tom Sever and Dan Irwin from NASA, Pat Culbert from the University of Arizona and Vilma Fialko from Guatemala's Institute of Anthropology began investigating la Justa. Satellite images showed a series of grand aqueducts and canals extending for miles that connected to all the largest ruins in the area. One theory is that these canals were used to bring water into the cities, where it was stored in underground water reservoirs, known as *chultuns*. Almost every Maya ruin has some form of a *chultun*, whether natural or man-made. Tikal has enough *chultuns* to store an estimated 40 million gallons. Researchers are trying to uncover the ancient Maya methods of using these *bajos* in the hope that modern farmers could adopt some of the techniques and help preserve the region.

Three of the most important Maya ruins are found within the la Justa wetlands and form what is known as the Yaxhá-Nakúm-Naranjo triangle.

YAXHA: Also seen as Yaxjá, Yaxhá is Maya for "green water" in reference to the nearby lagoon of the same name. The lagoon is home to the endangered jabiru stork and Moreletti's crocodile. Yaxhá is considered one of the significant Terminal Classic cities (AD 600-900), covering a two mile area with over 500 structures. So far only a handful have been excavated revealing architecture similar to Tikal. Down a steep hill is the **Calzado al Lago** (Lagoon Road), an area that acted as the gateway to Yaxha and more than likely a landing point for traders and merchants. **Plaza C**, just by the entrance, is where Teobert Maler first discovered a series of stelae dating back to the Classic period. In the **East Acropolis** you will find the magnificent **Building 216,** with its bird's-eye view of the surrounding lagoons and jungle. This is an excellent place to watch the sunset.

Next door is the **Complex of the Twin Pyramids**, reminiscent of the twin pyramids found at Tikal. Stele 13, found here, dates back to AD 793 and commemorates the end of a 20-year cycle known as Katum. Two ball courts are also located in this area. Farther into the jungle is the Mahler group, where the oldest structures dating back to Pre-Classic era (AD 300-600) are located. This area is currently undergoing a complete restoration scheduled to be finished in 2004. Archeologists believe there are several important tombs here in one of the three monumental buildings being uncovered.

Since Yaxhá does not see a huge amount of tourists, there is still plenty of wildlife. Colorful trogons or honeycreepers flit about while curious howler monkeys follow visitors around. Unfortunately, the lagoon has crocodiles, so swimming is not recommended. To reach the ruins, take the main route from Melchor to Flores and get off at the turnoff for

Yaxhá (there is a well-marked sign). Follow that road north for four miles to its end, where the park begins. There is no bus service along this road, but you can easily hitch a ride or arrange for a pickup ahead of time at El Sombrero Ecolodge (see page 295).

NAKUN: Also known as Nakúm, this is easily one of the more remote sites and must be approached on horseback during the rainy season. It rests just across Bajo La Justa and Río Holmul. A series of buildings, plazas and pyramids have Late Classical characteristics, such as altars, wide stairs and stelae. The most dramatic building is the main **acropolis** that can be seen emerging from atop the jungle. It consists of two large complexes joined by a *sacbe* (a type of road made from white limestone). One of the buildings has 32 rooms designed with the Maya arch, interesting stelae and vaulted chambers with original murals still visible. The site is four hours away by horse from the Yaxhá lagoon. Horses can be rented from El Sombrero Ecolodge, page 295).

POZA MAYA: Located between Yaxhá and Nakúm, Poza Maya gets its name from the large water reservoir found on site. Its location in the Baja La Justa swamp indicates it may have been a major agricultural site. The city is divided into three architectural groups with a main street connecting four plazas and a ball court. Nearby at La Aguada Maya are two dams, each measuring 656 feet (200 meters) long with a sloping construction indicating a possible cultivation channel. The site is about 2½ hours away by horse or 45 minutes by jeep from Yaxha.

NARANJO: Found 11 miles (17.7 km) east of the lagoon, Naranjo is considered an important Classic-era civic and ceremonial site. Over 38 well-preserved stelae have been discovered in over 50 plazas and, from them, archeologist have been able to piece together a history of the city. It appears that Naranjo had political ties with most of the surrounding cities and may even have begun as a satellite of Tikal. During the Late Classic period, Naranjo signed an alliance with Caracol (a city in Belize) and together they went to war and defeated the mighty Tikal. Naranjo also attacked its neighbor Yaxhá, destroying that city several times. A well-preserved hieroglyphic staircase depicts a sacrificial execution of a captured ruler from Yaxhá. Several of these stelae are on display in the central plaza in Melchor de Mencos, but the majority is now housed in the Archaeological Museum in Guatemala City (Museo Nacional de Arqueologiá y Etnologiasee; see page 83). The magnificent hieroglyphic staircase, ball court, plaza and acropolis remain on site to explore. The site is two hours by jeep from the ruins of Yaxhá or from the El Sombrero Ecolodge (page 295).

TOPOXTE: Topoxté is a Post-Classic ruin located on the largest island in the Yaxhá lagoon. It was first discovered in 1835 and to this day remains a bit of a mystery. Although its temples and buildings resemble Tikal and Yaxhá, they are on a smaller scale and have certain characteristics found only in

Post-Classical buildings, leading some to believe Topoxté was built after the collapse following the Classic period. Others believe the island was a burial site and the discovery of Tomb 49 appears to support this theory. The tomb, located just below Structure A in the Main Plaza, had a number of beautiful artifacts, including an intricately carved shell depicting one of the Maya gods of death, a polychrome plate and vase in perfect condition, and a frog carved from a conch shell. These objects are currently housed in the National Museum in Guatemala City.

Structure B, with its large columns and pillars, is typical of Post-Classic architecture. **Structure C** features the base of a pyramid with three tiered platforms. An altar decorated with the remains of stelae was found in front. Other stelae were found in front of Structure D. Also found on this site was a series of underground tunnels and caves, carved in limestone, dating from the late Pre-Classic (400 BC) period. The only way to reach this site is by boat, which can be arranged at El Sombrero Ecolodge (see page 295).

IXTINTO: Ixtinto is one of the smaller sites in the area, located on the south-eastern shore of Yaxhá lagoon by Río Ixtinto. A series of small mountains surround the ruins, which are believed to be from Pre-Classic to Post-Classic time. There are a total of 57 structures – many unrestored – divided into three groups. Fifteen plazas include several pyramids, palaces and observation points probably used for astronomy. The site is an hour from the Yaxhá lagoon.

MAYA TRIANGLE TOUR OPERATORS

El Sombrero Tours, ☎ 502/7-783-3923, www.eco-indextourism.org/en/el_sombrero_en, is run by the Campamento Ecológico (see below). It offers some of the best tours in the region, including the following.

- **Yaxhá-Nakún-El Naranjo Triangle**. This ruins tour includes transportation, two days on horseback, one night's accommodation at El Sombrero, one night camping at Nakún, horses, food, guides and entrance fees. Classed as a "medium" adventure, for which you need to be reasonably physically fit. US $180 per person, minimum of two people.
- **Topoxté-Yaxhá-Nakún-El Koch**. The tour includes transportation, one night accommodation at El Sombrero, one night camping at Nakún, horses, food, guides and entrance fees. Medium adventure. US $180 per person, minimum two people.
- **Crocodile Tours**. The lodge offers tours of the lagoon at night to spot crocodiles. Fee depends on the number of guests in the boat.

WHERE TO STAY

If you decide to use Melchor as a base, don't expect a relaxed or picturesque stay. That's not what this town is about.

HOTEL PRICE CHART

Prices are per person

$	under US $25
$$	US $26-50
$$$	US $51-85
$$$$	US $86-125
$$$$$	over US $125

Hotel Palace, *Barrio Fallabòn, ☎ 502/7-926-5196, 9 rooms, $.* Located just steps across the central bridge, this hotel offers very basic but pleasant rooms in small cabañas with single or double beds. All have hot water. Also on the premises is a decent restaurant. No credit cards.

Hotel Mayab, *Barrio el Centro, 4 rooms, $.* This very small hotel, located right off the central park, has large, super-clean rooms, furnished with a bed, overhead fan and private bath. A mini-van service operates out of the hotel to Flores and Guatemala City.

Campamento Ecológico El Sombrero, *Laguna Yaxhá, ☎ 502/7-861-1688, fax 502/7-861-1691, www.ecosombrero.com, 9 cabañas, $$.* This sweet little eco-lodge is nestled on the shores of Yaxhá lagoon, 15 minutes from the ruins. Its six spacious cabañas, with a combination of single or double beds and private baths, have been created using a combination of wood and stone topped off with a thatched roof of guano palm. Each has a small patio facing the lagoon and surrounding mountains. Three smaller cabañas with seven rooms and shared baths are also available. El Sombrero also remains faithful to its beginning as a campground, providing an area for hammocks or tents close to the lagoon. Electricity is generated by solar panels so only the main dining room has lights after dark (the cabañas have kerosene lamps, which add to the rustic romance). The dining room has an excellent menu of international and Guatemalan food to be enjoyed as you look over the surrounding gardens and grounds sculptured to blend into the landscape. The owner, Gabriella Moretti, is an expert on local ruins and offers some of the best tours (see page 294). With prior notification, the lodge will pick you up in either Melchor or Flores. Reservations recommended from December to February and July to August. No credit cards.

WHERE TO EAT

Most of the restaurants are small family-run operations that serve basic Guatemalan food.

Restaurante El Trópico, *Calle principal.* The Cristale family runs Melchor's largest restaurant, which serves a variety of hearty meals. A typical meal will include soup, meat, rice and fruit at bargain prices.

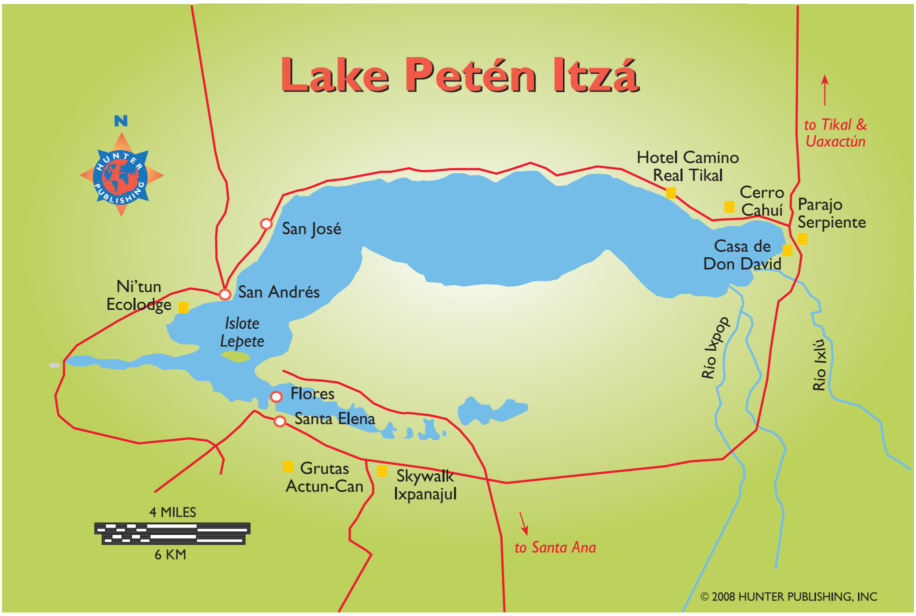
Restaurante La Cabaña, *Calle principal*. This is another local family restaurant offering typical Guatemalan food, as well as hamburgers, fries and sandwiches. Located in front of city hall.

Lake Petén Itza

(© Gudmund Aarseth/Dreamstime.com)

Lake Petén Itzá

Lago de Petén Itzá is the largest lake in the Petén and it has a number of communities on its shores. The largest is **Flores**, followed by its sister city of **Santa Elena**. You will find the most services, hotels and restaurants here. San Andrés and San José are two smaller communities close to Flores, while El Remate is on the other side of the lake.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Cerro Cahuí
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San José
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San Andrés
Islote Lepete
Río Ixpop
Río Ixlú
Flores
Santa Elena
Grutas Actun-Can
Skywalk Ixpanajul
4 MILES
6 KM
to Santa Ana
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FLORES

HISTORY

Once the ancient Maya city of **Tayasal**, Flores is now the capital of El Petén with a population of 2,200. There is little to see of the original city since most of it is underwater, but Tayasal remains historically important. When the Itzá were forced to abandon their cities up north, including Chichén Itzá, they took refuge in the jungles of the Petén, founding Noh-Petén (Tayasal) on the island of Chal Tun Ha (Lake Petén).

Their first contact with the **Spanish** was in 1541 when Hernan Cortes visited on his way to Honduras. He left behind a giant white horse that was too sick to continue the journey, promising to return. He never did. In 1618 when two Franciscan friars arrived they found the Itzá worshipping a large sculpture of a white horse they had named "Thunder Horse." Outraged, the friars smashed the idol and fled the island. In retaliation, the Itzá chief invited 20 conquistadors to Tayasal and promptly sacrificed them to the horse god. This earned the Itzá a reputation as cruel barbarians and made the Spanish even more eager to conquer them, but each of their many attempts ended in failure. It wasn't until 1697 that an army led by Martín de Ursua y Arismendi managed to overtake the city. However, the Spanish victory was based more on deception than military skill. One of the brothers, Fray Andrés de Avendaño, was fluent in the Itzá language. He noted a prophecy in their holy book about the surrender of the city on the same day as the arrival of the Spanish. The conquistadors used this to their advantage and the Itzá handed over Tayasal. The Spanish then swarmed through Tayasal smashing everything in sight. The Itzá may have surrendered the city, but they refused to live under Spanish rule and fled to the nearby jungle and established a new city. Their community has grown to be San José.

In 1698, the Spanish turned the island into a penal colony and Flores was founded two years later. It quickly became a commercial center for chicle, hardwoods, rubber and sugarcane, but as each of those markets slowed down the city was forgotten. In 1970, the Guatemalan government began promoting Flores as a tourist gateway to Tikal. Today the city is a charming island town with historical buildings lined up along cobblestone streets. At the top of the summit are the main square and a lovely cathedral. There are plenty of hotels, restaurants, shops and services here. Flores is connected to its sister communities of Santa Elena and San Benito by a manmade causeway.

Whatever charm the area holds quickly evaporates once you cross over to the mainland. **Santa Elena** and **San Benito** are a chaotic mix of unpaved one-way streets snarled with traffic and lined with scrappy shops, restaurants and budget hotels crammed one on top of the other. Locals refer to Santa Elena as *un disastero* (a disaster) and barely acknowledge San Benito. There are several good hotels on the shores of Santa Elena, but neither city is recommended, especially at night.

GETTING HERE & GETTING AROUND

BY BUS

There is one main route to Flores, CA-13, a well-maintained highway that starts outside of Guatemala City, passing through the departments of El Progresso, Zacapa and Izabal before turning north to El Petén. If you are coming west from the Highlands or Antigua, you will have to transfer in Guatemala City. If you are coming from the Verapaces Departments, you will change buses at El Rancho along CA-13. **Río Dulce** in Izabal has regular buses several times a day to Flores.

Most tourists use the **shuttles** that are available in most of the tourist areas (see page 101). They are more expensive than public buses, but are far more comfortable and convenient. Shuttle services operate between Panajchel, Antigua, Guatemala City, Cobán and Río Dulce.

It's a long haul from Guatemala City to Flores, 12-15 hours covering 344 miles (554 km). Many people prefer to break up the trip by passing a few days in Río Dulce or Poptún.

Once in Flores, you will have to walk across the causeway since most of the bus lines stop in Santa Elena. Cabs can take you over for Q10 and are readily available. Everything is in walking distance in both Flores and Santa Elena. Flores is a pleasant place to stroll, but Santa Elena is more like a strenuous game of dodge-that-diesel-bus-and-try-not-to-fall-into-a-pothole.

LEAVING FLORES: Trying to figure out which line goes where can be confusing. The best approach is to choose your destination and then ask for directions to the bus line (most are found in Santa Elena). The **INGUAT** office in the main square in Flores has a current bus schedule, but you should still double-check since times change regularly. Public bus lines include **Transportes Pinita, Transportes María Elena, Fuentes del Norte, Linea Dorado, Autobuses Máxima** and **Transportes Rosío**. These all offer second-class service except for

Linea Dorado, which runs a marvelous luxury bus from Guate to Flores.

TO TIKAL: Local buses leave from the end of the causeway every half-hour or so. Tourist minibuses will pick you up at your hotel or from the airport with advance arrangements (see page 71). The trip from Flores to Tikal takes about 1½ hours and you can come back the same day. If you decide to stay over at the ruins, let the driver know so he can reserve a seat for you the next day. The round-trip fare is Q42.

BY CAR

Most of the rental car companies are located at the airport and have a good selection of cars, 4WD trucks and minivans. Prices start at US $50 and usually have some kind of distance allowance known as *kilometraje*. Read the small print in your contract carefully and check the car for damage before signing anything. The cars all have standard gears. If automatic gears are important to you, make your request ahead of time. The largest rental companies are **Hertz**, ☎ 502/7-334-7421, **Koka Rent Autos**, ☎ 502/7-926-0526, and **Tabarini**, ☎ 502/7-926-0253, 7-926-0277.

BY PLANE

Many visitors choose to fly to Flores from Guatemala City. The Flores International airport is actually 1.8 miles east of Santa Elena on the mainland.

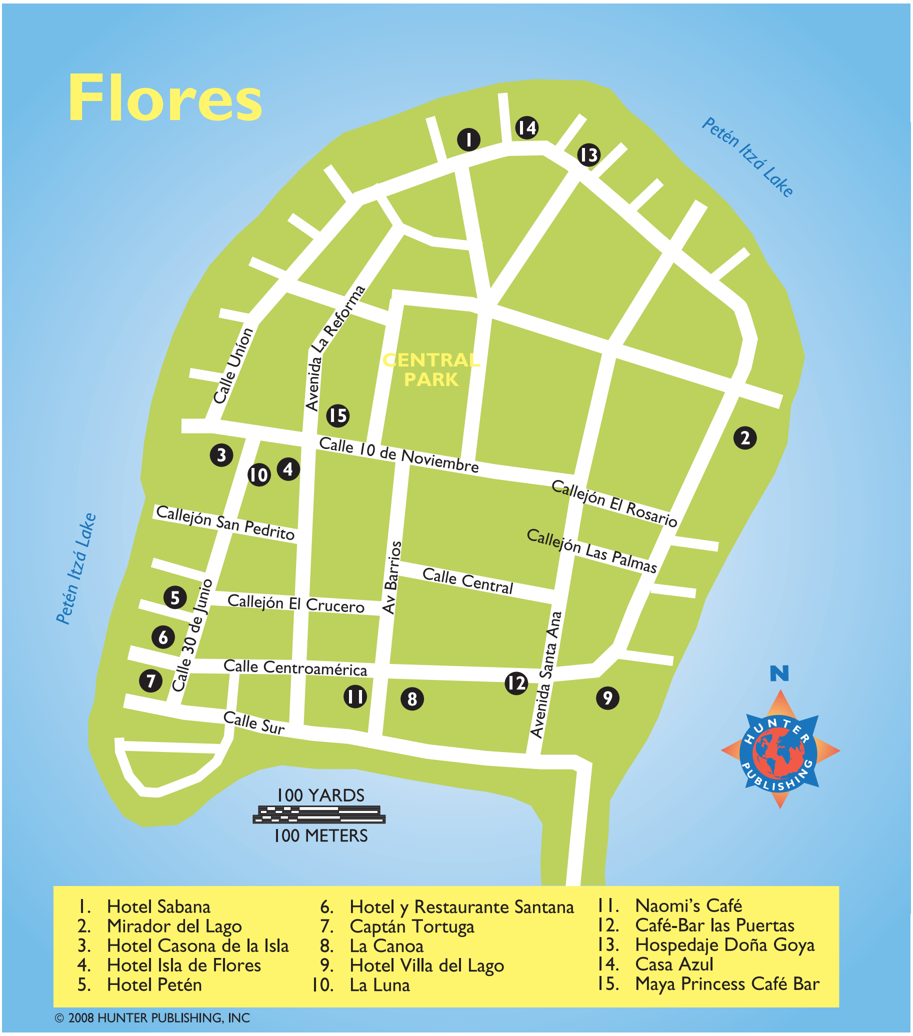
AIRLINES SERVICING TIKAL

Most of the domestic airlines offer flights to Tikal that leave from Guatemala. Some are more reliable than others. Rates start at about US $80 and can go as high as US $175 per person for a one-way ticket. Keep in mind these flights are often cancelled, delayed or overbooked. You must check directly with the airline to get their current schedule. Leave enough time to catch your international flight. All these domestic airlines have their offices at the Aurora Airport in Guatemala City.

Aeroquetzal	☎ 502/2-334-7689
Aviateca	☎ 502/2-334-4935
Lineas Aereas Maya	☎ 502/2-331-1841
Racsa, SA	☎ 502/2-361-7056
Taca	☎ 502/2-361-2144
Tikal Airlines	☎ 502/2-334-5568

Tickets for trips from Flores to Guatemala are less expensive if bought directly from the airline as the local agencies tend to overcharge.

There is no direct local buses from the airport to Flores, but there are plenty of tourist shuttle buses and taxis. The fare should be about Q14, one way.


Flores
Petén Itzá Lake
Petén Itzá Lake
CENTRAL PARK
Calle Union
Avenida La Reforma
Calle 10 de Noviembre
Callejón El Rosario
Callejón Las Palmas
Callejón San Pedrito
Calle Central
Av Barrios
Callejón El Crucero
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2. Mirador del Lago
3. Hotel Casona de la Isla
4. Hotel Isla de Flores
5. Hotel Petén
6. Hotel y Restaurante Santana
7. Captán Tortuga
8. La Canoa
9. Hotel Villa del Lago
10. La Luna
11. Naomi's Café
12. Café-Bar las Puertas
13. Hospedaje Doña Goya
14. Casa Azul
15. Maya Princess Café Bar

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BY BOAT

You can take a local motor launch (known as a *lanchas colectivo*) to the neighboring towns of San Andrés, San José or El Remate. Launches depart on the west side of Santa Elena near San Benito and also from Hotel Santana in Flores. Tickets are Q4. You must wait for the launch to show up, or you can hire a private boat for Q100. *Lanchas* may also be rented to tour the lake for between Q70 and Q200, depending on the number of people and length of the tour.

> **TIP:** Bargain hard, since the *lancheros* (boatmen) tend to overcharge. And don't buy the expensive guided tour to Tayasal – most of the ruins are underwater. Instead, rent a pedal boat from Hotel Petén and explore the lake on your own.

ADVENTURES ON FOOT

ACTUNCAN CAVE

This limestone cave is located one mile (1.6 km) west from Flores. It's also known as La Cueva de la Serpiente (Cave of the Serpent) after a large snake that used to live there (it hasn't been spotted in years). Inside are tall caverns between 10-20 feet (three to six meters) high with giant stalactites and stalagmites. The formations are famous for their shapes resembling animals and human faces. If the guide is around, get him to point out some of the more bizarre formations. Inside is adequately lit, but you may want to bring a flashlight with you. Be sure to wear sturdy shoes since the clay floor is wet and slippery. The tour takes about 45 minutes to complete. Entrance fee is Q14. You can walk from Flores, but taking a taxi for about Q14 is probably easier.

> **TIP:** Stay on the path. The cave is large and unmapped – not the kind of place to get lost in.

TAYASAL

There is little to see of this once grand city since the Spanish destroyed most if it, and the remains are now underwater or covered with jungle. But there is a wonderful lookout at the top of the hill that offers a spectacular view of Lake Petén. It's especially lovely at sunset. And it's a great place for a picnic or swim.

PETENCITO ISLAND

This tiny little island is popular with local families who like to come for picnics and swimming. The nature area includes a nice sand beach, picnic tables and a small wooden dock. There are well-maintained nature trails through the forest reaching a look out. There is also a humble little zoo with Guatemalan wildlife such as a jaguar, spider monkeys, armadillos, crocodiles, deer and coatimundi. The animals are well looked after, but their cages are not exactly luxurious, so heavy-duty animal lovers may want to stay away.

> GETTING HERE: *Colectivos leave from the same dock as those heading for San Jose and San Andres. You can also hire a private lancha, which will be more expensive. Rates vary from Q100 to Q300, so negotiate skillfully.*

SKYWAY IXPANPAJUL

Hanging bridge

"Tarzan" canopy tour

Located just four miles south from the airport, this park has nature trails joined together by hanging bridges. As you hike along you will be able to see the trees, flowers and plants up close or look down over the canopy of trees. Depending on the time of day, you may even spot some howler monkeys and other wildlife. All trails meet at the top of **Cerro Miramás** (See More Mountain), where you can see miles of jungle as well as Lake Petén Itzá. The park also offers horses for a trek through the surrounding jungle, hire a bicycle for the trails or take a ride in a tractor. There are cabañas and a camping area for those who would like to stay over in the jungle. Km 468 de Río Dulce, ☎ 502/2-336-0576, www.ixpanpajul.com. Open 6 am-6 pm, Monday to Friday. Q100 per person.

WHERE TO STAY

FLORES

HOTEL PRICE CHART

Prices are per person

$	under US $25
$$	US $26-50
$$$	US $51-85
$$$$	US $86-125
$$$$$	over US $125

Hotel Isla de Flores, *Av la Reforma, ☎ 502/7-926-0614, fax 502/7-926-0053, www.hotelisladeflores.com, 18 rooms, $$.* This hotel has medium-sized rooms with two double beds, air conditioning and cable TV. Small balconies open up to the street. The lobby is bright and nicely furnished in rattan furniture. It is a bit overpriced.

Hotel La Casona de la Isla, *Calle 30 de Junio, ☎ 502/7-926-0692, fax 7-926-0593, lacasona@gua.net, 27 rooms, $$.* This appealing three-story hotel has 27 attractive rooms with all the usual amenities. But it is the private balconies with their sunset views and the lakeside Jacuzzi, pool and restaurant that really make this hotel stand out.

Hotel Petén, *Calle 30 de Junio, ☎ 502/7-926-0692, 502/7-926-0593, 21 rooms, $$.* This is one of the town's first hotels. Inside, a smart courtyard leads to an indoor pool and restaurant. Just outside is the lakeside cafe with a great view. Unfortunately, the food is dreadful and the service only vaguely polite. The rooms are lovely though, with nice decorations, air conditioning and private bath. Ask for a room on the top floor, since the view of the lake from up there is spectacular.

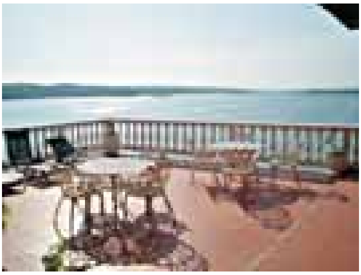
Hotel Sabana, *Calle Franterndid, ☎ 502/7-926-3323, www.hotelsabana.com, 28 rooms, $$.* Located at the far north of the island, this hotel has a great pool, small beach, a decent restaurant, laundry service and a tour agency. The rooms are spacious, with nice furnishings, but only some have air conditioning. All have really great views of the lake.

HOTEL SANTANA

Hotel y Restaurante Santana, *corner of Calle 30 de Junio and Calle Centroamérica, ☎ 502/7-926-0491, fax 502/7-926-0662, www.santanapeten.com, 32 rooms, $$.* This was one of the first hotels in Flores and has a great location on the end of the island. All three floors were renovated in 1999 so the rooms are modern and clean (first-floor rooms even have their own patios that face the lake). There is also a pool and restaurant by the lake. The nearby dock is the place to catch the boat heading out to the other villages.

Casazul, *Calle Fraternidad, 10 rooms, $$.* This stylish hotel is a converted colonial home decorated in shades of blue. Tastefully outfitted rooms have private baths, fridges and balconies. An airy lobby features wicker furniture.

Hotel Mirador de Lago, *Calle 15 de Sept, ☎ 502/7-926-3276, 9 rooms, $.* This budget hotel has very decent rooms that are clean, comfortable and safe with private baths. The more expensive rooms are right on the lake and have hot water and fans, while cheaper rooms are located across the street and are good value even without the view. No credit cards.



Villa del Lago terrace

Hotel Villa de Lago, *corner of Calle Centroamérica and Calle 15 September, ☎ 502/7-926-0629, 15 rooms, $.* The outside of this hotel is rather ugly, but the inside is quite decent. Rooms are tiny and basic, but cozy and tidy. There are some bigger (and more expensive) rooms with private bathrooms and cable TV. The hotel offers a great breakfast for Q14 and has an excellent laundry service. No credit cards.

Hotel El Canoa, *Calle Centroamérica #25, ☎ 502/7-926-0852, 8 rooms, $.* The staff here is really friendly and compliment this pretty hotel decorated with tiled floors and plants. The upstairs rooms are the nicest since they are quiet with good ventilation. Downstairs the rooms are a bit cramped with three single beds, but are great if you want to share. No credit cards.

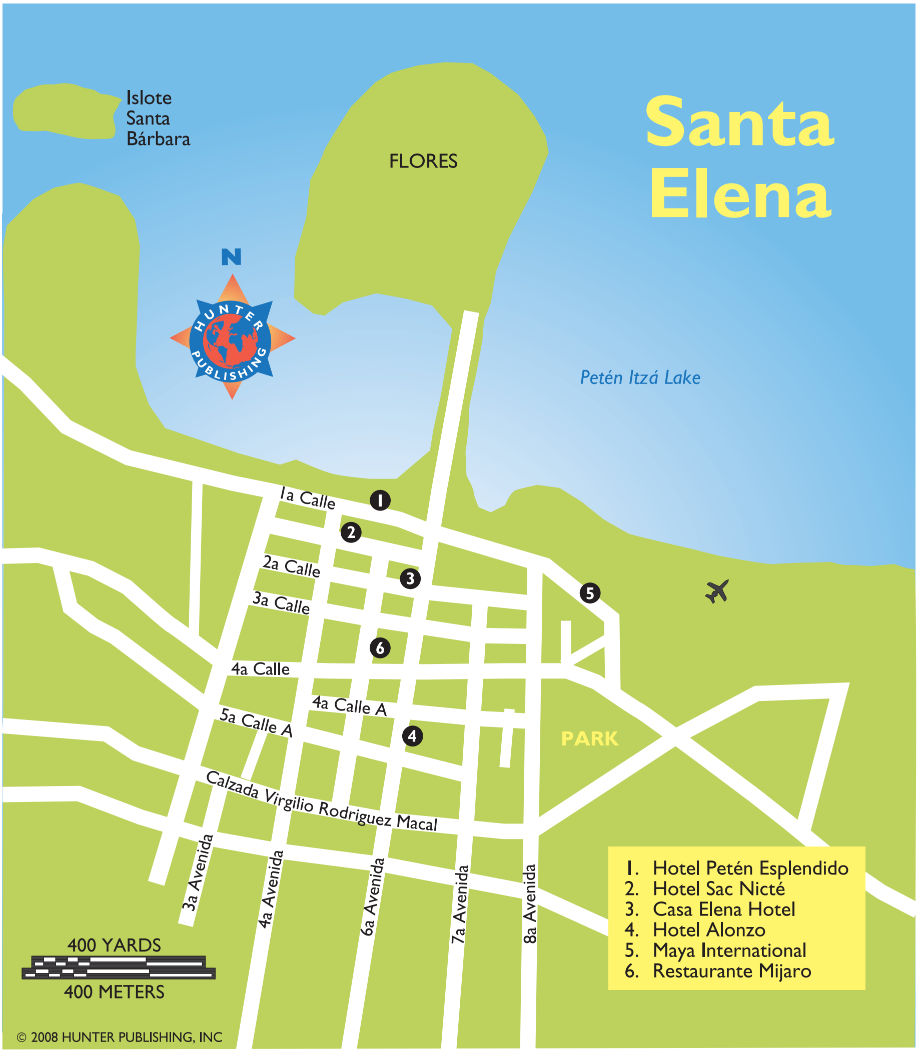
Hospedaje Doña Goya, *Calle Fraternidad, north end of the island, ☎ 502/7-926-3538, 7 rooms, $.* A family-friendly hotel, the Doña Goya offers clean comfortable rooms with private baths and balconies. A complimentary breakfast is served on the rooftop, where you can relax in a hammock.

SANTA ELENA

Petén Esplendido Hotel and Conference Center, *1a Calle 5-01, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-926-0880, fax 502/7-926-0866, www.petenesplendido.com, 62 rooms, $$$.* This luxury hotel is just three minutes from the Flores International Airport on the lake in front of Flores. It has all the usual luxuries, including air conditioning, cable TV, a large swimming pool and a posh restaurant and bar. Each room has a small balcony with a view of the lake.

Hotel Maya Internacional, *Lago Petén Itzá, ☎ 502/7-334-1818, www.villasdeguatemala.com, 30 rooms, $$$.* This is a quiet hotel tucked away on the lake. The rooms open up onto balconies facing the lake and are furnished with wooden furniture and ceiling fans. There is a pleasant bar and lakeside pool. The hotel's main draw is the tranquil location.

Casa Elena Hotel, *6 Av at 4 Calle Principal, ☎ 502/7-926-2238, fax 502/7-926-0097, 28 rooms, $$.* Casa Elena is situated right on the causeway just steps from the bus stop. It doesn't have much character, but it is extremely clean, comfortable and quiet. Rooms are on the small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1. Hotel Petén Esplendido
2. Hotel Sac Nicté
3. Casa Elena Hotel
4. Hotel Alonzo
5. Maya International
6. Restaurante Mijaro

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side, but come with new beds and terrific water pressure in the bathrooms. The restaurant has a decent menu and there's also a nice pool.

Hotel Alonzo, *6a Av, 4-99, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-926-0105, 7-926-2319, 12 rooms, $.* Just up from the bus station, this budget hotel offers extremely simple rooms with one double bed, an overhead fan and hot water. You can arrange for the bus to Tikal and other locations at the office. Next door is a cafeteria and drugstore. The staff is very friendly, although they speak very little English. No credit cards.

Hotel Sac-Nicte, *1 Calle, 4-45, ☎ 502/7-926-0092, 15 rooms, $.* A budget hotel with rudimentary rooms, rather soft beds and private showers that sometimes feature hot water. It does have its moments of cleanliness and the second-floor rooms have a view of the lake. This is a good option if you arrive late and need to catch an early morning bus, since the hotel is steps away from all the bus lines. No credit cards.

WHERE TO EAT

FLORES

There are plenty of restaurants in Flores. Unfortunately, most suffer from the copycat syndrome and serve the same menu of hamburgers, chicken and pizza. Thankfully, there are some gems here as well.

La Luna, *corner Calle 10 de Noviembre and Calle 30 de Junio. ☎ 502/7-926-0357.* This is, without a doubt, the best restaurant in Flores and the surrounding area. The menu is fresh and original, with delectable dishes such as pork medallions in a pineapple sauce or Cordon Bleu, mixed salads and fresh pasta. The charming décor adds to the whole dining experience. Prices range from Q49 to Q26.

La Casona de la Isla, *Calle 30 de Junio, ☎ 502/7-926-0692, 7-926-0593.* This restaurant, part of the comely La Casona Hotel, is an excellent place for lunch. Offerings include fresh salads, pastas and chicken specials from Q48 to Q27. Relax and watch local traffic from their terrace.

Captán Tortugaa, *Calle 30 de Junio.* A huge restaurant that stretches down to a lakeside terrace, Captán Tortugaa has an international menu that includes pizza, chicken, pasta, sandwiches and tacos. It's popular with tour groups. Q25-85.

Naomi's Café, *Calle Centroamerica, ☎ 502/7-926-3225.* The best place to get an early morning breakfast before heading out on tour. It's also open for lunch and has snacks throughout the day at its Internet café and small bookstore. Q10-25.

Café-Bar las Puertas, *Calle Central and Av Santa Ana, ☎ 502/7-926-1061.* This funky restaurant is brimming with local artwork. It serves fresh fish dishes as well as good homemade pasta. There's often live music on the weekends and they serve an excellent margaritas. Q25-100.

Maya Princess Café Bar, *Av la Reforma.* Thai food is the draw, including curry chicken, pad Thai, spring rolls and salads. The Maya Princess is a nice place for a quick lunch. Movies are shown in the evenings. Q15-40.

SANTA ELENA

Santa Elena doesn't really have any fine dining restaurants other than the ones found in the larger hotels, which tend to be overpriced. There are, however, some good restaurants for a quick and cheap breakfast or lunch.

Restaurantes Mijaro, ☎ *502/7-926-1615.* There are two locations for this restaurant serving simple Guatemalan food. The first is on main street just before the market and the other is in front of the Catholic church, a half-block from the causeway. You won't find anything extraordinary, but the fish and chicken are both good and there are refreshing *licuados* and other juices. Q11 to 35. No credit cards.

SAN ANDRÉS & SAN JOSÉ

The small town of San Andrés on the northeast shore of Lake Petén has a small Maya community.

GETTING HERE

The most pleasant way to reach either village is by **boat** from Flores. It's a half-hour ride to San Andrés and 45 minutes to San José. The cheapest option is via the public *lanchas* that leave whenever they are full and cost between five and seven quetzals. If you are in a hurry, negotiate the fare for a private boat. Rates start at Q250.

Buses leave twice a day from Santa Elena, one in the morning, one in the afternoon. But the road is bumpy, dusty and the bus usually crowded.

SPANISH LANGUAGE

A number of the town's Spanish schools are also involved in ecological projects.

At **Nueva Juventud Spanish School**, ☎ 502/5-711-0040 or 5-871-8316, www.volunteerpeten.com, you can home-stay with a local family while studying Spanish and volunteer at Parque Ecològico Nueva Juventud, a 150-acre nature reserve. The ecological park has an education center and outdoor classroom for local students to learn about the flora and fauna of Guatemala. Volunteers have been steadily working on the reserve to create a series of trails, gardens, swing bridges, small animal projects and a natural history museum. Fees start at US $150 per week for 20 hours of lessons with room and board. Non-students are welcome to visit the park.

Eco-Escuela is a project of ProPetén-C.I. that combines Spanish-language instruction with ecological activities such as helping local conservationists build the Sacbaquecan Interpretative Trail or work on the Ixcalapa Reforestation Area. Local outings include visits to Macantun Public Beach. One-on-one lessons are tailored to the needs of each student. Accommodations are with local Maya families who also provide all the meals. The course is US $175 per person and includes 20 hours of instruction, three meals a day and lodging. Classes begin every Monday. For more details, contact Tikal Connection, Eco-Escuela, ☎ 502/7-926-4981, www.ecomaya.com.

SIGHTSEEING

Picturesque San José village overlooks a lovely bay on the lake. Originally, San José was the village created by the Itzá when they were finally forced out of Tayasal (now known as Flores). For many years the only language spoken was Itzá. However, when the area opened up, the number of villagers speaking Itzá dwindled to a handful. In the early 1990s the community began a campaign to revive the language and it is now taught in all the schools in this region.

The **Asociacón BioItzá**, ☎ 502/7-928-8142, www.bioitza.org, has a sustainable tourism program in the area that includes a Spanish School and Medicinal Plant Garden with an ecotourism program in the reserve. The organization also offers guided birding tours and trips to some of the most remote archaeological sites lead by the YA'AX PAL (Green Kids in Maya Itzá). Students of BioItzá Eco-Cultural Spanish Language School stay with local families and take four hours of instruction per day as well as learning about the traditional use of medicinal plants, weaving techniques and traditional customs of the Maya Itzá. Cost is US $175 per week per person.

Also in the area is an interpretative **medicine trail** and center for **medicinal plants** run by the Bio-Itzá's Women's Group of San José. Students at the Escuela Bio-Itzá de San José are welcome to participate in both organizations. Classes are four to six hours a day and fees include lodging with a local Itzá family and three meals a day. For a small additional fee, you can also arrange outings to the Bio-Itzá Reserve, a cultural and ethnobotanical area located 14 miles north in virgin jungle. Cost for the language course is US $175 per person, per week. For more details, contact EcoMaya, Eco-Escuela de Español, Flores, Petén, ☎ 502/7-926-3202, www.ecomaya.com.

WHERE TO STAY

Ni'tun Eco-Lodge, *northeast shore of Lake Petén, ☎ 502/5-201-0759, www.nitun.com, 4 cabins. $$, meals included.* Bernie Mittelstaedt and Lore Castillo have created a enchanting hotel on their giant lakefront property just a few miles from San Andrés. Four stone and wood cabins with thatched roofs are furnished with comely Guatemalan textiles,

furniture and art. All the cabins have a view of the lake and are spaced far enough away to offer maximum privacy. The on-site restaurant has an amazing ambience and the food served is excellent. If available, be sure to try their *chiclero* chicken that uses herbs and spices from the rainforest. Bernie also owns Monkey Eco Tours and is considered one of the best tour guides in the area. He offers a number of excellent excursions to remote sites. The best way to communicate with the lodge is through their website.

EL REMATE

HISTORY

El Remate is a small village community on the east end of the lake. It's also on the same road as Tikal, which makes it a good place to stay if you are planning to visit the ruins. It is generally more tranquil and cleaner than Flores, with nicer hotels and restaurants at half the price. The Cerro Cehaui Biosphere, just outside of town, offer spectacular hiking and nature trails. This side of the lake is also cleaner, making swimming more pleasant. Fishing and kayaking trips are also available (see below).

GETTING HERE

Public **buses** leave from Santa Elena several times a day, while *colectivos* (minivans) leave hourly from both Santa Elena and the international airport. **Taxis** can be hired for about Q100. The ride takes about 20 minutes, depending on traffic. If you are coming from Belize you will probably be dropped off in El Cruce Ixlu and from there you can either walk the remaining 1.5 miles or take a bus or taxi.

ADVENTURES ON FOOT

HIKING IN BIOTOPE CERRO CAHUI

Cerro Cahui means giant crocodile in Mayan. Originally created in 1981 by Guatemala's University of San Carlos for the purpose of studying local flora and fauna, this 1,608-acre (650.73-hectare) reserve has more than six miles (9.65 km) of well-maintained hiking trails. It covers lakeshore, ponds and mature forest and is home to more than 60 species of trees, 28 species of mammals and 300 species of birds. Two trails lead to the top of **Cerro Cahui Mountain** to lookout points (*miradors*). From atop you can see the whole of Lake Petén Izta, as well as two smaller lakes nearby, Macanche and Sal Itzá. Río Ixpot and Río Ixlu flow through the reserve, along with two smaller streams, El Tigre (tiger) and El Pollo (chicken). Both trails take three or four hours to complete.

The dock at the entrance to the park is an excellent place to swim and enjoy a picnic. English-speaking guides are available for about Q200 and offer a three-four-hour trip with explanation on the plants and animals. If you want to trek deeper into the jungle, visiting a gorge, the rivers and other areas of the mountain, check with **Santiago Billy** at the Mon Ami Restaurant. He offers tours starting at Q150.

The park entrance fee is US $2.50. Open hours are 6:30 am until dusk. It's a 30-minute drive from the Flores Airport or a one-mile (1.5-km) walk from El Remate along a road that follows the lake. You can also hire a *lancha* (boat) for Q350-500 from Flores to take you across the lake to Cerro Cahui.

> **NOTE:** In the past, robberies on the trails were a problem. However, the community of El Remate hired a special tourist police force to patrol the area and the trails are now safer. However, it is still not recommended to travel the trails solo, especially if you are female.

ADVENTURES IN NATURE

BIRDWATCHING IN BIOTOPE CERRO CAHUI

Biotope Cerro Cahui (above) is home to more than 60 species of trees, 28 species of mammals and 300 species of birds, including toucans, parrots, hummingbirds, woodpeckers, owls, ocellated turkeys, red macaws, jaribu storks and crested eagles. You may also see spider and howler monkeys in the trees above.

Several rivers drain into the lake and are favorite nesting spots for many birds, including the jabiru stork. The **Río Ixpop** has some of the best birding in the region. Francisco from La Casa de Doña Tonita offers a two-hour birdwatching tour via the lake to the river nesting area. There's a minimum of two people and the cost is Q120 per person. You can also arrange a tour at La Casa de Don David (page 313) for the same fee.

Dock, Lake Petén Itza © Gudmund Aarseth

ADVENTURES ON WHEELS

BIKING AROUND THE LAKE

The road around the lake is a decent unpaved country road. Other than some dust from the speeding shuttle bus on its way to the Camino Real (a major bone of contention with locals), the route is pleasant for biking. An excellent day-trip is to follow the road all the way around the lake, visiting San Andrés and San José, and ending in Flores. You can return on the local bus to El Remate. Biking along the main highway is not recommended since there is no shoulder and everyone speeds. Bicycles are complimentary for guests of La Casa de Don David and Casa Roja Eco-Lodge (see pages 313 and 314). There are rumors of a bicycle rental place opening up in the village, so ask around.

ADVENTURES ON HORSEBACK

A three-hour horseback ride with a local guide should cost between Q70 and Q105. You can choose where to go, but popular trails include those in the Cerro Cehai and surrounding areas. The best place to organize a tour is through La Casa de Don David (page 313).

ADVENTURES ON WATER

CROCODILE TOUR

Lake Petén is home to the endangered Morelet's crocodile that, fortunately, doesn't hang about the shores of El Remate. Instead, it prefers its own company and that of the lake fish to tourists. A two-hour tour can be arranged with La Casa de Don David (page 313) or La Casa de Doña Tonita with Francisco. On the trip, you visit nearby rivers where the crocodiles make their home. There's a minimum of two people and the cost is Q150 per person. Advance notice is appreciated.

KAYAKING

The tranquil waters of Lake Petén are perfect for kayaking. Mornings, when the temperature is much cooler, is the best time. Several of the local hotels rent kayaks at very reasonable prices that run about Q10 per hour (less on longer rentals). Check with La Casa de Doña Tonita, Casa Roja Eco-Lodge and La Casa de Don David (see page 313).

WHERE TO STAY & EAT

El Remate has an abundance of pleasant and economical hotels that double as restaurants. Reservations are usually not needed. If one hotel is full, they will recommend another hotel and point you in the right direction.

Camino Real, *Lake Petén Road, ☎ 502/7-926-0207, www.caminorealtikal.com.gt, 72 rooms, $$$$.* This fancy hotel is located within the Biotope Cerro Cahui on the outskirts of town. Rooms are spread among seven pyramid-shaped buildings. Ground-level units have garden views, while those on the middle and top floors have a view of the lake. The rooms are rather generic, with cable TV, comfortable beds and luxurious bathrooms. You may forget you are in the jungle. Included are use of kayaks, a pool, windsurf boards, sailing, fishing and daily excursions into the reserve. Two **restaurants** serve decent food and there's also a bar. The electricity here is from a generator that can be quite loud – check the noise level in your room.

La Casa de Don David, *☎ 502/7-928-8469, www.lacasadedondavid.com, 9 rooms, $$, meals average US $4.50.* This comfortable and welcoming hotel is a landmark in the village. Don David, one of the original settlers, has 25 years of experience in the area and graciously shares his knowledge. Rooms are homey, with lots of hot water (it costs a little extra) crisp linens and good beds. All guests have access to a beautiful garden that faces the lake. In the main building is their excellent restaurant, which serves good home-cooked meals and daily specials. The wide open-air terrace also overlooks the lake and is a popular spot with locals and tourists alike. You can book tours here, buy bus tickets and exchange money.

Hotel le Mansion del Parajo Serpiente, on the Main Hill, ☎*/fax 502/7-926-8498, 10 rooms, 1 bungalow. US $20 per person, US $75 for bungalow.* This idyllic oasis is tucked away on a cliff overlooking the lake. The views are incredible and the higher you go the more breathtaking it gets. Each room has been elegantly decorated with handwoven bedspreads, rugs and locally crafted furniture. A verdant tropical garden filled with butterflies and orchids alongside a pool offers the perfect setting for a Garden of Eden vacation. For true romance, book the top bungalow and its outside Jacuzzi facing the lake. Meals are served on a charming open-air terrace. Owner Nancy Salazar is a pioneer and, if you are lucky, you may hear some of her tales about opening up the first hotel in Tikal and raising three children in the jungle.

La Lancha Village, *Lake Petén Itzá, past Camino Real.* ☎ *502/7-928-8331, www.lalanchavillage.com, 6 bungalows, $$.* This engaging eco-hotel is set on a hilltop overlooking Lake Petén about half an hour from El Remate. Six simple but chic bungalows are scattered throughout the property and each offers two double beds, overhead fans, private bathroom and a balcony with a lake view. There is a lovely pool set in the jungle and the main lobby has an open-air restaurant overlooking the property. The French owners have created a delicious and varied international menu. Swimming, lounging or going for jungle walks are the preferred activities at this tranquil hotel. Tours to the various ruins, including Tikal, Uaxactún and Ceibal, are offered at reasonable prices for guests.

There are several good budget hotels right on the main strip. None have phones or take credit cards.

Posada Ixchel, has three simple but clean rooms. $.

Hotel Bruno has comfortable rooms with shared baths for Q25. They also serve an early breakfast if you book one day ahead. $.

Hotel Sun Breeze has four simple cement rooms with shared baths. The rooms can get really hot, so check before you book. $.

LAKESIDE

Farther down on the road that follows the lake are some funky hotels with great lake views.

Casa Roja Eco-Lodge, *5 rooms, on the El Remate road to Camino Real, no phone, $,* is a small rustic hotel with thatched Maya houses built with local materials. The restaurant serves vegetarian food and guests have complimentary use of bicycles. The Cerro Cahui reserve is within walking distance.

Next door is **La Casa de Doña Tonita**, with five thatched-roofed rooms that feature double beds set out in dormitory style. A small restaurant serves basic breakfasts and lunch. This hotel has the largest dock and is the best place for swimming. A variety of excellent tours are offered. Doña Tonita is very popular with backpackers and fills up quickly. *15 beds. $.*

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Maya Biosphere

The Maya Biosphere Reserve is an ecosystem of more than 6,000 square miles in northern El Petén. It encompasses the largest area of wetlands in Central America as well as the largest intact rainforest. Included in the Biosphere are five national parks: Tikal, El Mirador, Rio Azul , Laguna Del Tigre and Sierra Lacandón. There are also three wildlife reserves, also known as biotopes: El Zotz, Dos Lagunas and Laguna Del Tigre. Within these parks and reserves are an amazing array of wildlife that includes such endangered species as the jaguar, scarlet macaw, spider monkey and harpy eagle.

The most famous area in the Biosphere is Tikal. As the southernmost part of the park, it is also the most accessible. Close to Tikal are the ruins of Uaxactun and Biotope El Zotz.

© Daniel Loncarevic

Jaguar Pyramid, Tikal

North of Tikal, at the top of the Biosphere, are two more national parks: El Mirador in the west and Río Azul/Rio Bravo in the East. In between these two is the Dos Lagunas Biotope.

El Mirador National Park shares a border with the Calakmul Biosphere in the state of Campeche, Mexico, and the ruins of El Mirador are found here. Río Azul National Park, shares its border with the Río Bravo National Park in Belize and the ruins of Río Azul and Kinal are found here. No permanent residents live within either park and visitors are permitted for only short periods of time. Tours to this area are a combination of birdwatching, jungle trekking and horseback riding. You should be in excellent physical condition to visit this area.

The westernmost section of the Biosphere also shares a border with Mexico. The Laguna Del Tigre National Park encompasses the Laguna del Tigre Wildlife Reserve. Most of this reserve is closed to the public, but there an excellent tour along the Scarlet Macaw Trail. Directly below Del Tigre is the newest national park, Sierra Lacandón that joins onto the Parque Nacional Sierra del Lacandon in Mexico. Several famous ruins are found in this area, including Piedras Negras. It is also the entry point for exploring the Mexican ruins of Yaxchilán and Bonampak.

TIKAL NATIONAL PARK

Tikal translates to "Where Spirit Voices are Heard." This famous ruin is located in the middle of Tikal National Park that is part of the Maya Biosphere Reserve. Here, magnificent jungle and wildlife can still be found. Amid the ceiba, zapote and mahogany trees are over 285 species of birds, troops of spider and howler monkeys, jaguars, pumas, ocelots, pecarry, small deer and other rare animals. Tikal is considered one of the most important Maya cities, as well as one of the largest. It is vast and has over 3,000 structures within a six-square-mile (9.65-square-km) radius. These include ball courts, palaces, streets, plazas, temples, baths and terraces, in addition to great pyramids. At least 14 different rulers from AD 320 to 869 have structures dedicated to them.

GETTING HERE

BY BUS: There are no direct public buses to Tikal. You will need to reach Flores first, then catch one of the local **shuttles** that leave from the causeway every half-hour or so. Round-trip fare is Q42. If you are staying in El Remate, you can flag one of the tourist shuttles down coming from Flores or have your hotel arrange a taxi for you.

Temple V

BY PLANE: There are no longer any direct flights into Tikal. You must first fly into the Flores International Airport and take a tourist shuttle from there (see the Flores section for more information on flights and ticket prices).

HISTORY

Tikal appears to have been founded in 700 BC, although construction started as early as 500 BC. The pyramids in the Great Plaza were mostly completed by 100 BC. In its beginning, the city remained under control of **El Mirador**, its larger northern neighbor. At the same time it competed with its sister city, **Uaxactún**, for trade routes and territory. When **King Yax Moxh Xoc** ascended the throne around AD 230, the power of El Mirador had faded and he began building up Tikal. The dynasty Yax Moxh Xoc founded continued for decades. A series of brilliant leaders, all part of the great Jaguar clan, turned Tikal into the most powerful political and religious center in the Maya world. Great Jaguar created a powerful alliance with other cities in the highlands, including **Kaminaliju**. This alliance allowed Tikal to finally overtake Uaxactún. Soon after, it dominated trade routes north to the Yucatán Peninsula, west to Yaxchilán in Chiapas, Mexico, and south to Copán, Honduras. It would control these areas for over 1,500 years.

Tikal remained unchallenged until AD 456 when the city of **Calakmul** (now in Campeche, Mexico) attacked. This inspired other cities to rebel and began 137 years of battles that Linda Schele referred to as "Star Wars" in her book *A Forest of Kings*. In AD 562, Ah Ha (Lord Water) of **Caracol** attacked Tikal and brought the great city to its knees. Tikal remained crippled until **Hasaw Chan K'awil** or Ah Cacau (Lord Chocolate) ascended the throne in AD 682. Under his kingship the city experienced a renaissance. Lord Chocolate refurbished the main ceremonial areas and started building the famous twin pyramids Temple I and II. His son **Yik'in Chan K'awil** finished those temples and started Temple IV.

Tikal was abandoned in AD 900 and what brought about its downfall remains one of the greatest mysteries surrounding the Maya.

The jungle swallowed Tikal and it was forgotten for almost a thousand years. **Friar Andres de Avendano** is thought to be the first white man to see Tikal. His chronicle about his 1696 escape from Tayasal (now Flores) described passing through an ancient city filled with large white buildings and temples.

In 1848, a *chiclero* by the name of Ambrosio Tut showed Modesto Mendéz, the Governor and Magistrate of El Petén, the ancient city. Their report attracted a gaggle of explorers to the area. Serious investigation of Tikal began in 1881 when the famous archeologist **Alfred P. Maudslay** arrived. **Teobert Maler** mapped the city from 1895 to 1904, but it was **Alfred Tozzer** who eventually completed the mapping. He worked at the site until his death in 1954. **Sylvanus Griswold Morley** also investigated the ruins from 1914 to 1937.

© Raymond Osterlag

Temple 1

FAMOUS TIKAL EXPLORERS

- **ANDRES DE AVENDANO**: Considered the first white man to visit Tikal. In 1695, Avendano had been living with the Itzá when he discovered a plot to have him sacrificed by the seeming friendly King Canek. He fled the area and inadvertently stumbled onto Tikal while trying to make his way back to Merida in Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula. In his chronicles, he mentions passing through a city filled with grand white buildings.
- **AMBROSIO TUT & MODESTO MENDEZ**: Ambrosio Tut, a *chiclero*, rediscovered the ruins while in the jungles gathering the sapodilla sap. He reported his finding to Modesto Mendéz, Governor and Magistrate of El Petén. Together, Mendéz and Tut wrote a report for the Guatemalan government which was published by *La Gaceta* newspaper. They employed Eusebio Lara to draw their discoveries. In 1853, the report was published in the Berlin Academy of Sciences' Magazine, introducing Tikal to European and American treasure hunters and scientists.
- **GUSTAVE BERNOUILLI**: In 1877 Gustave Bernouilli, a Swiss botanist, removed several lintels from Temples IV and I during his expedition. They are now on display at the Völker Kunde Museum in Basel, Switzerland. Unfortunately, he did this without permission from the Guatemalan government.
- **SIR ALFRED PERCIVAL MAUDSLAY**: Maudslay was the first to map and take photos of Tikal (the camera had just been invented during his visit in 1881-82). He was the first to start excavations by removing the 1,000-year-old vegetation from the Grand Plaza. He lived in the Five Story Palace in the Central Acropolis while working on the site. He spread awareness about the Maya civilization, publishing over 87 volumes. Maudslay is considered the father of Maya archeology.
- **TEOBERT MALER**: Maler arrived in 1895 to draw a map commissioned by Harvard University's Peabody Museum. He worked on the map until 1904, but never turned it in. Although a respected German scholar, he thought nothing of drawing graffiti on one of the ancient walls where he was living. You can see his artwork in the Maler Palace, located in the Central Acropolis.

Teobert Maler, c 1910

- **ALFRED TOZZER:** Tozzer was sent by Harvard to complete Mahler's job in 1910. He took many photos and worked extensively at the ruins until his death in 1954.
- **SYLVANUS GRISWOLD MORLEY:** This famous scientist from the Carnegie Institution worked at Tikal from 1914 until 1937. He was instrumental in deciphering many of the Maya hieroglyphics inscribed on monuments. A small museum in the park is named for him and contains many artifacts found during the 1956 dig by the University of Pennsylvania.

Morley, c 1912

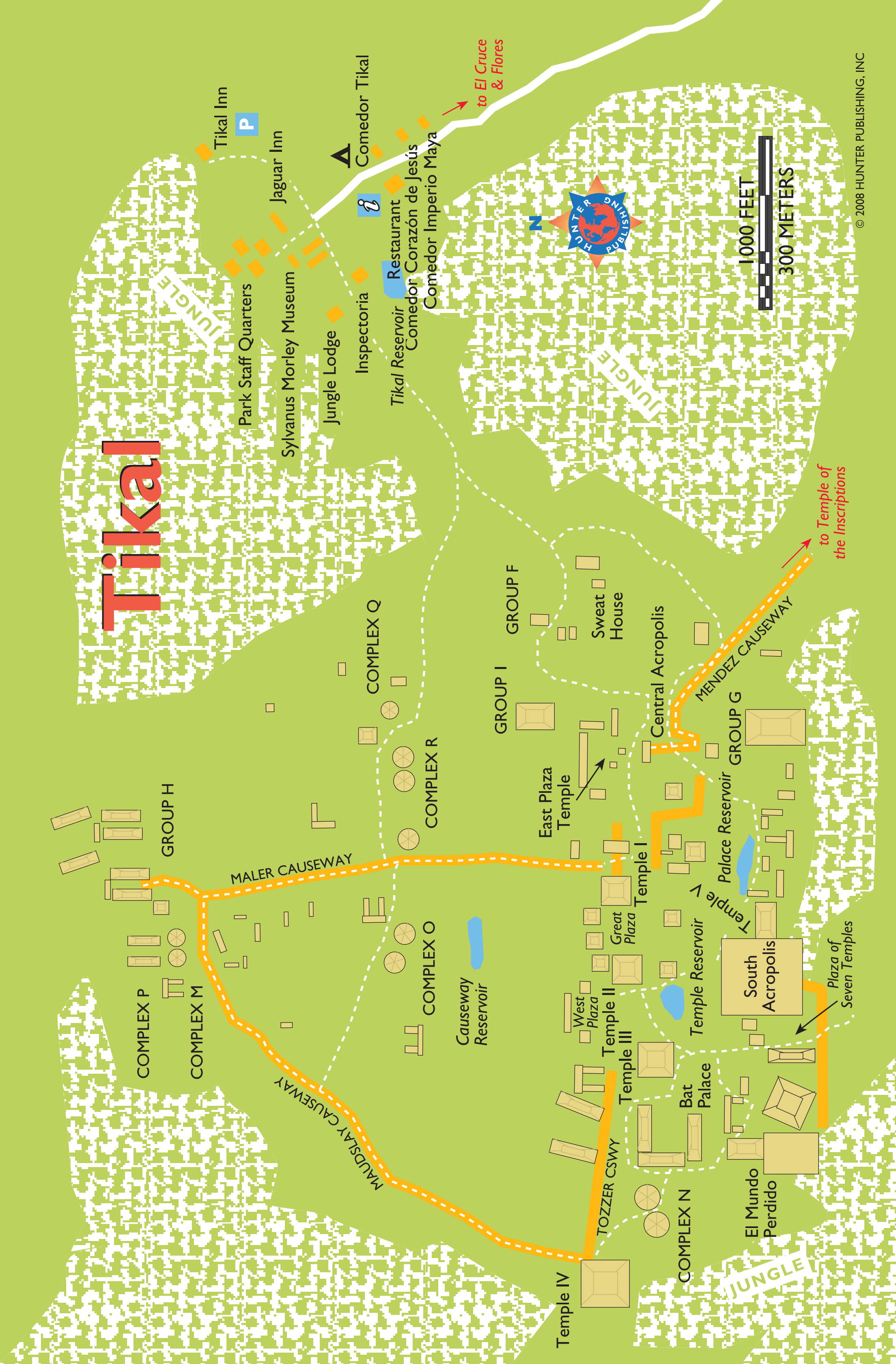
The ruins were first declared a national monument is 1931 and became a national park on May 26, 1955. The following year excavations began when the University of Pennsylvania and Guatemala government began the 14-year **Tikal Project**. In 1979, Proyecto Nacional Tikal continued their work unearthing hundreds of buildings including the Lost World Complex. That same year, Tikal was named an UNESCO World Heritage Site. In 1991 Guatemala and Spain began work to restore Temples I and V. Work was completed early in 2001.

Tikal remains one of the most famous Maya sites ever discovered and it attracts visitors from around the world.

The **Museo Sylvanus G. Morley**, a small museum, is found at the entrance to the ruins. It has an interesting collection of ceramics and artifacts found during various excavations at the ruins. There is an excellent stele of King Stormy Sky and a re-creation of Lord Chocolate's tomb with the original bones, seashells, pearls and ceramics found during the dig in 1957. Other items on display include an incense burner, ceramic platter and a miniature jade carving of a jaguar.

The **Stele Museum** houses the most important Tikal stelae. Many were suffering from erosion before being placed in the museum. Alongside the carvings is an exhibit showing how the Maya may have erected these huge stones. A second display, Called the Era of Exploration, was done by the Pennsylvania University and outlines all the digs at the ruins.

Nearby is the **Visitors Center** with a relief map of the ruins. There is also a restaurant, bathroom and gift shop. The center has an excellent map of the park for sale, as well as guidebooks and souvenirs. You can arrange for a guide here too, though guides aren't necessary to enjoy the ruins.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Inspectoria
Tikal Reservoir
Restaurant
Comedor Corazón de Jesús
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300 METERS
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GROUP H
COMPLEX Q
GROUP F
Sweat House
GROUP I
Central Acropolis
COMPLEX R
East Plaza Temple
MENDEZ CAUSEWAY
to Temple of the Inscriptions
GROUP G
MALER CAUSEWAY
Temple I
Palace Reservoir
Great Plaza
Temple V
COMPLEX O
Causeway Reservoir
COMPLEX P
COMPLEX M
West Plaza
Temple II
Temple III
Temple Reservoir
South Acropolis
Plaza of Seven Temples
MAUDSLAY CAUSEWAY
Bat Palace
TOZZER CSWY
COMPLEX N
El Mundo Perdido
Temple IV
JUNGLE

EXPLORING THE RUINS

Complex Q & Complex R

This is the first set of buildings you will find just off the entrance. Complex Q is a twin pyramid complex with some excellent Late Classic sculpture. Stele 22 shows Lord Chi'taam scattering corn and the glyphs give a detailed description of his life. On Altar 10 there is a carving showing a bound prisoner captured by Lord Chi'taam. It's only a short walk from here to the Great Plaza.

The Great Plaza

The Great Plaza is probably the most spectacular part of Tikal, surrounded by stelae, carved altars, ceremonial buildings, palaces and a ball court. It contains the famous twin pyramids, Temples I and II. Both are majestic examples of Late Classical architecture. It is thought that The Great Plaza was the focus of sociopolitical life at Tikal; various causeways connect each of the temples to each other and the Great Plaza.

TEMPLE I: Located at the east end of the Great Plaza facing the setting sun, Grand Jaguar Temple I was built in AD 734 to honor Lord Chocolate. Rising 155 feet, this pyramid contained a vaulted tomb with the remains of Lord Chocolate resting alongside 180 jade artifacts, 90 bones carved with hieroglyphics, shells, stingray spines and other sacred objects. At the top is a temple with three rooms and a corbel arch. In 1877 Gustave Bernouilli removed a carved wooden lintel showing a jaguar from this temple, along with a wooden lintel from Temple IV depicting Lord Chocolate with his son Yiki'in. Both are still on display in Basel, Switzerland's Völkerkunde Museum. Unfortunately, you can no longer climb Temple I – it's been closed for years because several people tumbled to their deaths.

The Great Plaza

TEMPLE II: Built on the west end of the Great Plaza, Temple II faces the rising sun. It was the first temple to be completed by Lord Chocolate and appears to be a monument to his wife, Lady Twelve Macaw. It stands 122 feet (37 m) tall, shorter than its twin Temple I because of the missing roof-comb. You can still climb this pyramid for some impressive views of the city and surrounding jungle.

TEMPLE III: The Temple of the Jaguar Priest, or Temple III, was constructed in AD 810 and rises to 180 feet (55 m). The lintels here are the most intact of all those found at Tikal. Carved from the hard wood of the sapodilla tree (the same tree that produced sap for Chiclets gum) one lintel depicts a rather portly king dressed in jaguar skins. In front of the temple, resting by a stele with carvings of the water god Chaac, is a stone altar. Archeologists believe it may hold the remains of Lord Chi'taam, Tikal's final ruler. This was quite possibly the last great temple to be erected before its fall.

BAT PALACE: Near Temple III is the Bat Palace, also known as Structure 5C-13. This two-story palace is filled with stepped vaults and interconnecting rooms that have built-in benches and beds. Next door is Complex N, where Altar 5 and Stele 16 were found virtually intact. The originals are now in the visitor's center. The Tozzer causeway leading to Temple IV starts here.

TEMPLE IV: Temple IV, also known as Temple of the Double Headed Serpent, is Tikal's tallest pyramid standing 229 feet high (69 m). It was built in AD 740 by Lord Chocolate's son, Ah Yik'in Chan K'awil, and is considered his most ambitious construction project built to commemorate his father. The base of the pyramid is quite wide and midway up is an entrance to a small chamber. Archeologists believe Yik'in Chan K'awil is buried here. It's an easy ascent up a steel ladder to the summit. From the top, you can see the tips of Temples I and Temple II.

TEMPLE V: Constructed around AD 750 and rising to 187 feet (57 m), Temple V is the second-largest building in the park. During an excavation by Guatemala's Instituto de Antropolgia e Historiá (IDAEH) a royal tomb was discovered here with the remains of an unknown ruler. A 10-year restoration project recently completed by IDAEH rebuilt the temple stairs, allowing visitors to scale the pyramid.

TEMPLE VI: Temple VI is located south of the Mendéz Causeway and is believed to have been built around AD 766 by Ah Yik'in Chan K'awil with the inscriptions finished during the reign of Lord Chi'taam, Tikal's final ruler. At the base of the temple are Stele 21 and Altar 9, which records Yik'in's ascension to the throne. But the temple's real claim to fame is the rear central panel of the 40-foot roof-comb, which contains one of the longest inscriptions found at Tikal with 186 glyphs each two feet high (.6 m) and three feet (.9 m) wide. Some archeologists believed this to be Yik'in's tomb, rather than Temple V.

CAUSEWAYS

Named after famous archeologists who worked at Tikal throughout the years, these causeways or paths connect the various sections of the ruins with each other.

- **Mendéz Causeway**: Connects Temple VI (Temple of the Inscriptions) with Group G (Palace of the Grooves). It continues along to Structure 41 to the North Palace of the Central Acropolis, eventually reaching the back of Temple I.
- **Mahler Causeway**: Connects Complex P and Group H with Complexes R and Q, continuing on to the East Plaza in the North Acropolis.
- **Tozzer Causeway**: Connects Temple III in the Grand Plaza to Temple IV.
- **Maudslay Complex**: Connects Complex P, M and Group H with Temple 4.
- **Morley Causeway**: Gives access to the Bahren Group.

NORTH ACROPOLIS: The North Acropolis contains a royal necropolis with eight funerary temples one on top of the other dating as far back as 800 BC. The acropolis was built atop an artificial terrace that supported ceremonial buildings. Nearby Stele 31 contains a detailed list of the early rulers and historical events during this period. The tomb of King Curl Nose First Crocodile (AD 379-429) held the skeleton of a crocodile with a carved jade head, three turtle and bird skeletons, stingray spines, shells and several effigy vessels. Nearby Burial 48 contained the remains of Stormy Sky (AD 429-456) alongside two young men, obviously sacrificial victims. Thirty pottery vessels, stingray spines, shells and green obsidian objects were found nearby. Another tomb was found dating back to 100 BC. It contained the remains of a noble woman, along with paintings, jade, shells and other precious objects. The most impressive finds are the two 10-foot masks: the first mask is found under a thatched roof and the second down a short passage. You will need a flashlight in order to see the masks.

CENTRAL ACROPOLIS: This was a huge complex of residential and administrative palaces inhabited by the royal families of Tikal. There are 45 buildings and six courtyards that stretch over 370 acres. Each ruler added his own buildings, so there are layers upon layers of construction here. The best preserved are the home of Jaguar Claw I, Mahler Palace and Five Story Palace. In the past, these buildings were home to the first archeologists who came to Tikal during the 19th century.

SOUTH ACROPOLIS: The South Acropolis has several enormous buildings with seven different platforms that has led archeologists to believe it dates back to the Pre-Classic period. However, it remains to be excavated and studied.

EAST ACROPOLIS: Found behind the Grand Plaza. Archeologists believe this was the location of the ball courts and the main market.

MUNDO PERDIDO (LOST WORLD COMPLEX)

The Lost World has 38 structures arranged in a traditional Maya pattern that indicate this section was an astronomy complex. The broad Great Pyramid is almost 100 feet high and was built between AD 250 and 300. Underneath are four other pyramids, the oldest one dating back to 600 BC, making it one of the oldest pyramids in Tikal. Delicate samples of ceramic pottery were also uncovered here and are on display at the National Museum in Guatemala City (see page 83).

WARNING: Although robberies have become rare in the park with the introduction of tourist police, you should still exercise caution on some of the more remote paths. Hire a guide, travel in a group and check with the visitor center and with other tourists to see if there are any areas in the park experiencing trouble.

PRACTICALITIES

Children under age 12 can visit at no charge; adults are charged Q70. If you arrive at the park after 3 pm your ticket is good for entry the following day. You should plan for a two-day visit, as it's difficult to see everything in one day. Bring plenty of water and wear sturdy walking shoes, especially if you intend to climb any of the pyramids. Stay out of the sun between 1 and 3 pm, when the heat is the most intense. Try to visit the ruins early in the morning or late in the day, when it's cooler.

WHERE TO STAY

There are three hotels and a campground in the park. All are booked well in advance, often do not honor reservations and will charge higher prices when they are busy. None is a good value, especially considering electricity and hot water are limited. Staying in El Remate may be a better option. However, if you are keen to see Tikal at night or in the early morning, then staying overnight is the best way to go. Don't bother trying to convince the guards to let you sleep atop one of the pyramids. It's been

HOTEL PRICE CHART

Prices are per person

$	under US $25
$$	US $26-50
$$$	US $51-85
$$$$	US $86-125
$$$$$	over US $125

forbidden since gangs of backpackers (who all read the same guidebook) started using the Temple IV as a crash pad and ended up defacing the whole area.

Jungle Lodge *(Hotel Posada de la Selva),* ☎ *502/2-476-8775, www.junglelodge.guate.com, 46 rooms. $$$.* This attractive hotel was originally built to house the archeological team in Tikal. The deluxe rooms are in duplex bungalows, each with a private bath, two double beds and private patios looking out into the jungle. The smaller and more economical rooms with shared baths are in a separate location. Landscaped jungle paths lead to the main building and a restaurant, bar, lobby and swimming pool shaped like a temple.

Hotel Tikal Inn, ☎ *502/7-926-0065, fax 502/7-926-0065, 24 rooms. Main building: $$$.* Located near the airstrip, this hotel offers rustic rooms with thatched roofs, private baths and Guatemalan décor. The rooms attached to the main building are cheaper and noisier than those in the bungalow. The main building has a charming pool and restaurant surrounded by a lovely garden.

Hotel Jaguar Inn, ☎ *502/7-926-0002. 9 rooms $$; campground $.* The smallest hotel in the park is located next to the museum. The rooms are very rudimentary, equipped with a double bed, clean bath and ceiling fan. There are also dormitory-style beds (four to a room), as well as a small campground with outdoor bathroom facilities. Tents are supplied. 9 rooms.

Tikal Campgrounds, *by entrance and airstrip, no phone – first come, first served, $.* These are by far the cheapest accommodations in the park. During the dry season, camping out can be a pleasant experience; you lie in your tent listening to howler monkeys, birds and other jungle animals. The campground is actually a large open lawn with a few trees and some concrete platforms with palapa roofs and space for hammocks (bring your own). Camping equipment can be rented at the visitor center.

WHERE TO EAT

It's slim pickings and high prices. Most restaurants are located in three small buildings to the right of the park entrance. Known as *comedores*, these small diners serve simple Guatemalan food. The best of the bunch is **Imperio Maya**. Here, the meal of the day is usually roast chicken, rice, salad and fruit, for about US $6. Others include **Comedor La Jungla Tikal, Comedor Tikal, Comedor Sangrado de Jésus** and **Tienda Angelita**. The visitor center also has a restaurant but it is grossly overpriced and the food is terrible.

UAXACTÚN RUINS

Uaxactún is another one of the older Maya cities, first settled around 900 BC. The oldest stele found in the Maya world, dating back to 328 BC, was found here, leading researchers to believe this is where the Maya perfected their writing system and created their first calendar.

HISTORY

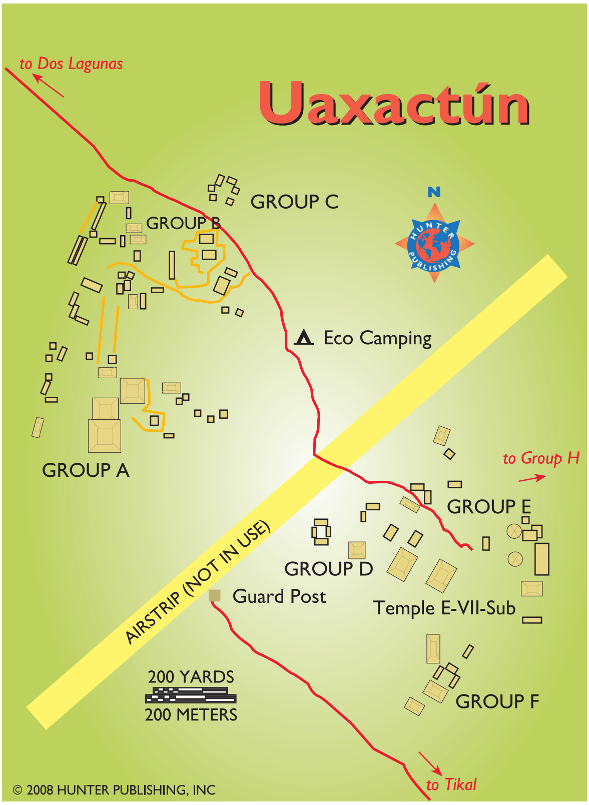
The city had the misfortune of being only 12 miles (19.31 km) north of Tikal. As the cities grew, so did their rivalry. For years, the two cities lived as peaceful neighbors under the domain of **El Mirador**, a larger and more powerful northern city-state. However when El Mirador declined in AD 230 an intense competition sprung up between Uaxactún and Tikal. On January 16, AD 378, **Great Jaguar Paw** led his army into Uaxactún carrying a new weapon supplied by its distant ally Teotihuacán in Mexico. It was a spear thrower that allowed warriors to attack from afar. Uaxactún didn't stand a chance. It was defeated and came under the control of Tikal. It would not be free until AD 562, when Lord Water of Caracol brought Tikal to its knees, leaving Uaxactún free to rule itself. Like many Maya cities, Uaxactún was eventually abandoned by AD 900 and was covered by the jungle.

Uaxactún ruin

The city was rediscovered in 1916 by the famous team of **John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood**, but remained untouched until **Sylvanus Morley** began major excavations during the 1920s and '30s with help from the Carnegie Institute of Washington. Morley came up with the name Uaxactún – Maya for "eight stones" – from an inscription found in a stele. Despite a major plan developed by the Guatemalan government in 1928, which included an airstrip being built, Uaxactún never blossomed into a major tourist attraction. Ironically, it is often added as a supplement tour to Tikal – it continues to live in the shadow of its sister city even today.

EXPLORING THE RUINS

Uaxactún is largely an unrestored site most famous for its small Pre-Classic pyramids decorated with simple stucco masks representing the


Uaxactún
to Dos Lagunas
GROUP C
GROUP B
N
HUNTER PUBLISHING
Eco Camping
GROUP A
to Group H
GROUP E
AIRSTRIP (NOT IN USE)
GROUP D
Guard Post
Temple E-VII-Sub
200 YARDS
200 METERS
GROUP F
to Tikal
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sun god. It possesses some of the oldest and best-preserved stelae in the area. Ten of the 13 stelae uncovered date back to the Early Classic period (AD 300-500) when the first stone monuments were erected and stucco was used to decorate temples. The Late Classic period (AD 590-889) saw many new structures built with plazas and terraces, decorated with even more elaborate stucco.

The first structure seen by the entrance is a small residential **palace** with a simple layout from the Early Classic period. Nearby is a more complicated **acropolis** with an unexcavated temple that offers a view of the surrounding area. Near the entrance to a broad causeway is **Stele 5**, which records the famous battle that brought Uaxactún under Tikal's power. This leads to Group B and **Structure B-XIII**, which has a beautiful mural dating back to the Classic period (AD 600-900). It depicts a woman on a raised platform surrounded by 25 other figures. Following this is the main **palace**, **acropolis** and Group A , which includes a series of temples and residential compounds layered one upon the other. Some well-preserved stelae are also found here.

Structure E-VII-B in Group E is the most impressive of the buildings, with a four-sided stairway flanked by huge masks and covered with stucco. Three additional **pyramids** align along this eastern edge. It is thought these buildings were used as astronomy labs as the equinox and solstice can be accurately calculated by sighting the sunrise from the eastern stairway.

The modern community of Uaxactún consists of 140 families who survive by hunting and harvesting allspice and xate (a palm used in flower decoration). Through the help of ProPetén, ☎ 502/7-926-1370, the locals have become active conservationists who recognize their unique role in preserving the forests. By starting up Uaxactún's Forest Society and sponsoring eco-tourism, residents hope to maintain their 80-year record of no timber being cut from the land.

TOURS

Uaxactún's hiking and horse trails are open all year and the road from Tikal to Uaxactún has recently been upgraded. Locals offer a variety of tours through the ruins and into the surrounding jungle.

UAXACTUN TOUR OPERATORS

If you speak some Spanish you can book a tour directly with the tourist collective in the village of Carmelita, **Cooperativa Integral de Comercialización**, Comité de Turismo, Carmelita, San Andrés, ☎ 502/7-861-1809, www.mostlymaya.com/carmelita.html. You can arrange day tours to the ruins at Tikal. There are also several tour companies in Flores and El Remate offering tours to Uaxactún. Prices depend on the number of people and length of stay. Day-trips are the most popular tours. Prices start at about $40.

WHERE TO STAY

Eco-Lodge El Chiclero Camp, in Carmelita Village, no phone, Q30 per person. This is, literally, the only place to stay in town. It has seven double rooms and four singles in small cabañas, which are made with wood from the Bajareque tree and covered with thatched guano palm leaves. There is also a campground with hammocks and mosquito nets.

Their small museum, **Museo Juan Antonio Valdes**, has a good collection of about 350 artifacts (shell, jade, bone and ceramics) dating back to the Pre-Classic period (250-550 BC).

BIOTOPE EL ZOTZ

In Mayan, zotz means "bat," and this biotope was created to protect the thousands of bats that live in the cliff-caves deep in the rainforest. The area is also home to a rare form of anteater, as well as a number of birds, jaguars and howler monkeys. The **Zotz-Tikal trail** is one of the newer trails developed to encourage eco-tourism in the area. It starts at Tikal Park, passes near the bat caves and ends in the small jungle community of El Crucea a Dos Aguados. The actual site of El Zotz has only a few structures and few have been excavated. The most important is the **Pyramid of the Devil** (Pyramid del Diablo). Although covered with mud and moss, you can climb del Diablo where, on a clear day, you can see the pyramids of Tikal. But the real draw in this biotope are the bats that emerge from their caves at dusk, momentarily blackening the sky.

This area requires a special permit to visit so you must book a tour. A typical tour starts in Flores and travels by jeep to Cruce dos Aguadas and continues on pack horses for five hours to the Zotz campgrounds. The bat caves are visited in the evening. The next day you visit the ruins and then take a three-hour jungle trek back to Tikal.

EL ZOTZ BIOTOPE TOUR COMPANIES

Check with **ProPetén**, Calle Central, ☎ 502/7-926-1370, fax 502/7-926-0495 in Flores – they arrange most of the tours along with **EcoMaya**, Calle 30 de Junio, ☎ 502/7-926-4981, www.ecomaya.com. **Monkey Tours-Ni'tun Eco-Lodge**, ☎ 502/5-201-0759, www.nitun.com, in San Andrés, can also arrange tours.

EL MIRADOR NATIONAL PARK

El Mirador is one of the largest and most important Maya sites. Historians, researchers and archeologists are just beginning work on this massive ancient city and much remains to be explored and deciphered.

HISTORY

El Mirador was one of the very first Maya cities, estimated to be over 2,000 years old. The city flourished as a trading, religious and political center from 200 BC to AD 230, dominating all other cities in the area. Because of the large concentration of structures – three square miles covered with massive buildings – archeologists estimate there were over 80,000 people living in this ancient city. Despite its importance, few tourists visit El Mirador and, unfortunately, only the main group of buildings flanked by two massive pyramids has been excavated.

EXPLORING THE RUINS

The city center is marked by two large complexes facing one another. **El Tigre** is the western pyramid. Rising to 141 feet (43 m) and almost 18 stories high, it has a base that is 14 acres wide, the equivalent of three football fields and six times the surface area of the giant Temple IV at Tikal. Directly in front of El Tigre is the **Central Acropolis**, where burial chambers were unearthed. Inside were bodies painted red and surrounded by stingray spines, obsidian lances and other objects of the bloodletting rituals. The Danta complex is found at the site's east end on a natural rise in the land. It has a bottom base that supports three platforms. The widest platform is 68 feet (20.72 m) high and is topped off with three pyramids. Measured from top to bottom the complex is 229 feet (69.79 m) high – one of the tallest in the Maya world.

On April 18th, 2002, the area was recognized as a special archeological zone, and President Alfonso Portillo signed legislation establishing the **Mirador Basin National Monument**. It is hoped the decree will protect El Mirador from the increasing problem of looting and encourage more excavation of the site.

TOURS

This site is not easily reached and, unless you speak fluent Spanish, you should book with a tour agency. Most tours take five days and are a combination of horseback riding and hiking. Accommodations are offered in tents or hammocks. Tours depart from Flores by jeep and travel to the small village of Carmelita, 40 miles (64.37 km) north of Flores. Prices range from US $200 to 300 per person, depending upon the number of people and length of your trip.

EL MIRADOR TOUR OPERATORS

For tour information contact **ProPetén**, Calle Central, ☎ 502/7-926-1370, fax 502/7-926-0495 in Flores, or **EcoMaya**, Calle 30 de Junio, ☎ 502/7-926-4981, www.ecomaya.com. **Monkey Tours-Ni'tun Eco-Lodge**, ☎ 502/5-201-0759, www.nitun.com, also offers tours to El Mirador.

RÍO AZUL NATIONAL PARK

Located at the far northeast corner of the Petén, Río Azul is one of the most isolated spots in the Maya Biosphere. Most roads are barely accessible with a four-wheel-drive vehicle during the dry season (February through June). During the rainy season, the roads are closed.

HISTORY

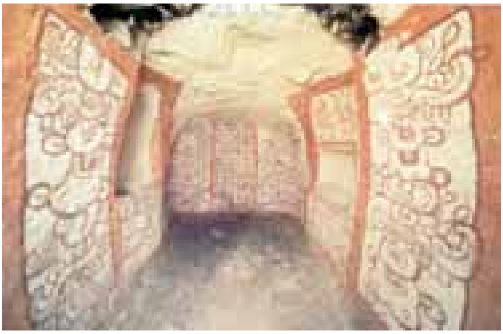
Río Azul reached its peak in the Late Pre-Classic period (AD 100-300), serving as an administrative center for an area of approximately 66 square miles. It appears to have been abandoned around AD 535 and then briefly re-occupied in the Late Classic period (AD 800-900).

There are over 350 structures here, and archeologists believe the population reached as high as 5,000. The site was not discovered until 1962 and, unfortunately, was left unprotected so was heavily looted. When archeologist Ian Graham visited in 1981, he discovered over 150 trenches dug by looters. For years, Río Azul supplied the international black market with its treasures. Today, there are armed guards in the park.

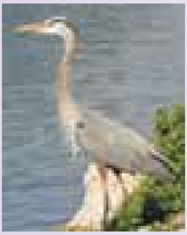
EXPLORING THE RUINS

Two temple platforms from the Late Pre-Classic period have been uncovered. The largest is **Structure G-103** at 49 feet high. The tallest temple, unrestored **AIII**, stands at 154 feet (46.9 m) and resembles temples at Tikal. Nearby is an **acropolis** with 12 different platforms supporting a number of buildings. Monuments discovered include three round altars with stelae depicting the executions of eight people. Historians believe this commemorates Río Azul coming under the control of Tikal as the famous kings of Tikal, Curl Nose and Smoking Frog are mentioned. A series of dams and canals have been found on the site as well.

Río Azul is most famous for its **tombs**, often referred to as **kinal**. These tombs are lined with white plaster and painted with vivid red glyphs. Unfortunately, many have been sacked, including Tomb I, which was discovered torn open with most of the murals hacked out. What little remains in Tomb I indicates that it may have been built for the son of Stormy Sky, another famous Tikal king. Tomb 19 was discovered in 1984 carved out of bedrock. It contained the mummified body of a 35-year-old man who had been painted with red cinnabar and wrapped in burlap before being laid out on a wooden lintel. He was surrounded by a variety of objects, including blue stucco jars, jade beads carved into faces, stingray spines and 15 vessels. A companion tomb, Tomb 23 was discovered a year later and contained another man also surrounded by burial objects. It is believed these tombs may also have been built for sons of Stormy Sky.



Kinal, *Río Azul*



Heron

Birds found in Río Azul include motmots, trogons, royal flycatchers, great curassows, woodpeckers, crested guans, tanagers, quetzals, plain chachalacas, red-capped manakins, white-collared manakins, blue herons, white kingfishers, sandpipers and tiger herons.

TOURS

The jungle here is undisturbed by man, so there is a tremendous amount of wildlife to be seen. Most tours combine birdwatching with their visits to the ruins. Because of its status as a protected zone and the difficulty in reaching Río Azul, you can visit only if accompanied by one of the tour authorized agencies. Tours start at US $250 per person, depending upon the number of people in your party and length of stay. Accommodations (tents or hammocks) and food (prepared on site) are included in the price.

AUTHORIZED RÍO AZUL TOUR COMPANIES

Contact **ProPetén**, Calle Central, ☎ 502/7-926-1370, fax 502/7-926-0495, in Flores, or **EcoMaya**, Calle 30 de Junio, ☎ 502/7-926-1363, fax 502/7-926-3322, www.ecomaya.com.

LAGUNA DEL TIGRE NATIONAL PARK

This is one of the largest sections of the Maya Reserve or Maya Biosphere, stretching northwest to Mexico, south to the municipality of La Libertad and east to San Andrés. It is another remote area with little development. Two mighty rivers – the Candelería and San Pedro – flow through the area, eventually meeting up with Río Usumacinta in Mexico. The un-excavated ruins of Dos Naciones, El Pavo, El Peru and El Yesal are also found here.

Laguna del Tigre has the largest body of freshwater in Central America. Great extensions of flood plains with little topsoil make the area unsuitable for farming. It is home to a large number of plant and animal species, including the endangered scarlet macaw. The largest freshwater wetland, the Biotope Laguna del Tigre, is formed by four small lagoons: La Lámpara, La Canaleta, La Gloria and Lago Azul. During the rainy season they form one large body of water.

This area is difficult to visit. Aside from the scarlet macaw trail (below), most of the area is restricted to those conducting research. Unfortunately, this area is also under siege from oil companies, who have been allowed to build an exploratory road into the heart of the park and, in the process, have destroyed wetlands. Multinationals are pressuring the government to build more roads and open the area up to oil companies. Conservationists are fighting to preserve the area and let it remain undeveloped.

ADVENTURES IN NATURE

SCARLET MACAW TRAIL

The Scarlet Macaw Trail Tour is a eco-tourism project started by ProPetén to bring income into the Maya communities of Centro Campesino and El Cruce a Dos Aguadas. Located inside the park, the trail leads through untouched rainforest, where scarlet macaws and other birds make their nesting grounds. All tour guides are locals who know the area extremely well and all proceeds go to their families. Hopefully, with another source of income, the inhabitants of both villages won't be forced to sell their valuable resources to greedy industrialists.

A pair of macaws takes flight

With its wide, strong wings, brilliant coloring and raucous call, the scarlet macaw is the most magnificent parrot. It has a vivid scarlet breast with yellow on its upper wings that blends into blue. The rump is a light blue and the tail a deep shade of royal blue with streaks of red. Its face is pinkish white with a black lower bill. Macaws can reach up to 35 miles an hour (56.72 kph) in flight and prefer to perch high up in trees, where they make their nests.

The scarlet macaw is one of the most endangered birds in the world. During the 1990s a study by the Belizean government reported only 24 left alive in the wild. Due the concentrated efforts of conservationists, it is making a slow comeback; in 1996 a population of 100 new birds was spotted in the area. But the bird remains threatened due to loss of habitat and its young being captured for sale in the illegal pet trade. To learn more about conservation issues the Petén faces, contact Conservation International, 2501 M Street NW, Suite 200, Washington DC, 20037, ☎ 800/459-5660, newmember@conservation.org.

The El Peru Ruins is the major archeological site in the park. It has not yet been excavated, but there is enough treasure here to warrant a station run by IDAEH with guards who try to prevent any further looting. El Peru is located deep in the jungle past a series of large caves known as the Cuevas de Jobontún. The first temple seen is the un-restored **El Mirador de los Monos** (Monkey Lookout), which offers an excellent view of the jungle. Howler and spider monkeys are often seen nearby, as is the colorful scarlet macaw.

The full five-day tour includes boating down Río San Pedro to visit the Q'ekchí Maya village of **Paso Caballos**; treks through various ecosystems for lessons in jungle survival and botany; **crocodile watching** along Río Sacluc; a visit to the **El Perú ruins** and to the **Buena Vista Caves**.

This is a long, hot hike through tropical jungles, so you need to be in somewhat decent shape. The trail becomes more difficult to maneuver during the rainy season, when everything turns to mud. Accommodations and meals are provided at the **Estación Biologico Las Guacamayas** (Scarlet Macaw Biology Field Station).

LAGUNA DEL TIGRE TOUR COMPANIES

All tours start in Flores and travel 48 miles (80 km) north to Paso Caballos. ProPeten, Foundation, Calle Central, ☎ 502/7-867-5296, 7-867-5143, fax 502/7-867-5127, www.propeten.org in Flores can make arrangements for you. Give yourself lots of time to arrange this tour since it won't be as straightforward as some of the more accessible ruins.

Southwest of the Maya Biosphere

SIERRA LACANDÓN NATIONAL PARK

Eco-tourism is relatively new in the Sierra Lacandón National Park (SLNP), Guatemala's second-largest national park. Located in the southwestern region of the reserve, this park covers over (501,290 acres (202,865 hectares) of *cenotes*, mountains, caves, lagoons and ponds. It shares its southwest border with Mexico, hooking up with the Parque Nacional Sierra del Lacandón.

Karstic formations are responsible for the number of caves and mountains found here. Nearby lowland savannas create the many freshwater lagoons. In total, the park has recorded 27 species of mammals, 424 resident and migratory bird species, 97 reptile species, 32 amphibian species and 112 species of fish in Río Usumacinta. Several large ruins, including Piedras Negras, are found alongside the mighty Río Usumacinta.

SIERRA LACANDÓN TOUR COMPANIES

Fundación Defensores de la Naturaleza co-manages the park with CONAP, but nothing is very organized. You can contact the groups directly to arrange a tour. **CONAP**, 19 Av B 0-83, Zona 15 Vista Hermosa II, Guatemala 01015, PBX 502/369-5151, www.defensores.org.gt. **Monkey Tours** in the Ni'tun Eco-Lodge (☎ 502/5-201-0759, www.nitun.com, San Andrés) offers some excellent birdwatching and jungle tours to the area.

PIEDRAS NEGRAS RUINS

Piedras Negras (Black Stones) is located on the banks of Río Usumacinta on the Mexican-Guatemalan border. Named for the black limestone cliffs in the area, this site has been left untouched by looters and remains pristine. Little is known about the history of Piedras Negras. Forty small test excavations were done in the 1930s, but nothing was finished and most of the records have been lost. Although little has been restored, it is still considered an important site; this is where the famous archeologist **Tatiana Proskouriakoff** cracked the Maya hieroglyphic code while studying emblem glyphs on one of its stelae. Recognizing a pattern where certain glyphs went with certain dates and people, Proskouriakoff was able to start rebuilding the language. She tested her theory in nearby Yaxchilán, identifying Shield Jaguar and Bird Jaguar as father and son. By 1964, when Proskouriakoff published the last of her work on the glyphs, few disputed her findings.

Tatiana Proskouriakoff

Piedras Negras remains a tantalizing mystery. In June 2000, the University of Brigham completed its fourth season of fieldwork. They found that while there were two Pre-Classic pyramids on site (R-3 and R-4), there were many more Classical structures. **Structure R-8** was examined and several layers were found with a tomb at their center. Several other structures were also found to be layered with the older Classic architecture atop Pre-Classic structures. The **West Group**, which also included the acropolis, had **Patio 1** and **Patio 3** that were also layered with ceramic pieces. At the base of **J-4 Pyramid** was a panel (dubbed Panel 15) that had 150 hieroglyphic blocks dated to between AD 626 and 706. Included in the glyphs was the ancient name of the city, Yokib (Maya for large entrance). Archeologists believe this name may be in reference to the large *cenote* (sinkhole) found near the center of the city. Several burial grounds were found near a patio in **Structure C-10**, which is thought to have been a residential area. A number of ceramics and carved bones were discovered close by a large stele depicting slaves being presented to the king. A team at the university is deciphering the glyphs as part of a new field study.

PIEDRAS NEGRAS TOUR COMPANIES

Trips to Piedras Negras are conducted by: **Maya Expeditions**, 5 Calle A 14-07 Zone 10, Guatemala City, ☎ 502/2-363-4955, fax 502/2-368-1248, www.mayaexpeditions.com; **Monkey Tours-Nítun Eco-Lodge**, ☎ 502/5-201-0759, www.nitun.com.

SIDE TRIP TO MEXICO

A popular side trip from the Petén is a visit to the ruins of Yaxchilán, Bonampak and Palenque in Mexico.

GETTING THERE

The easiest way to get here is to take the **bus** from either Flores or Sayaxché to the frontier town of **Bethel**. A newly paved road makes the trip relatively smooth. The immigration office at Bethel has been set up specifically for people shuttling to and from the ruins, so you shouldn't have any problems exiting or entering. Once in Bethel you can take one of the many boats crossing Río Usumacinta to the Mexican town of **Frontebra Corozal**. Prices range from US $12 to US $25, depending on the boat. The ride takes about half an hour.

BONAMPAK RUINS

Bonampak (Paintings on the Walls) is famous for its **murals** depicting Maya ceremonial life. They are perfectly preserved with all their colors intact and are considered the best example of Maya painting. Located in three adjacent rooms, the murals have various scenes of war victories and the celebrations that followed.

Little is known about this city. Bonampak was completely obscured by the jungle until 1946, when a Lacandón Indian, Chan Bor, brought three Americans to the ruins. Bonampak appears to be an Early Classic site that peaked between AD 200 and 400. At different times it was either an ally or enemy of its sister city Yaxchilán. The site is large, extending for many miles, but the main excavations – and the murals – are in the **Central Plaza**. It appears that most of the buildings and murals were commissioned by Chan Muan II, a member of the royal family at Yaxchilán, who took the throne in AD 776. The 19-foot-high (six-meter) Stele 1 in the Grand Plaza shows Chan Muan II dressed in all his finery. He is featured on several other stelae on the Acropolis at the south end of the site. Murals are found in the south end, as well as in the Templo de las Pinturas (Temple of the Paintings). Room 1 murals celebrate the birth of Chan Muan II's son. The central Room 2 shows a battle scene followed by prisoners of war being tortured. Room 3 shows a celebration scene with dancers, musicians and soldiers dancing on the steps of the Acropolis. Because the site is small and can be visited in about two hours, it is often combined with a visit to Yaxchilán.

YAXCHILÁN

Yaxchilán, or Place of Green Stones, is set alongside Río Usumacinta under the canopy of the rainforest. The site is famous for its beautifully preserved carvings and stelae and has 86 structures built during the Classic period from AD 200 to 900. Many of the carvings celebrate the history of the potent dynasty of King Jaguar Shield, his two wives (Lady Xoc and Lady Eveningstar) and son Bird Jaguar, who ruled Yaxchilán from AD 681 until 800. Under their rule, Yaxchilán became the most powerful city along Río Usumacinta. Yaxchilán is unique because it shows ritual acts being conducted by women. In her book *A Forest of Kings*, Linda Schele notes, "The depiction of a woman as the principal actor in ritual is unprecedented at Yaxchilán and almost unknown in Maya monumental art at any site."

Pyramids in the upper level of Yaxchilán

Yaxchilán has a certain mystery to it. Many of the buildings are covered with a fine moss, hence the name. It is considered a city of seers because many of the carvings are about rituals and communicating with the gods.

You first enter the site through Edificio (Building) 19, which is actually a labyrinth leading to the **Grand Plaza**, a ceremonial center with a number of important structures. Edificio 17 is a **steam house**. Close by is Edificio 14, a **ball court** built by Shield-Jaguar I. Edificio 12 has seven doorways built between AD 360 and 700, each with a carved

Stele 18 from Yaxchilan Chiapas on display at the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City

lintel. The **Red Temple** (Edificio 6), named for its colorful stucco, is found on the riverbank. The famous Stele 21 depicts a bloodletting ceremony with four members of the royal family. It's near the south end of the Great Plaza. Other stelae (including Stele I showing Bird Jaguar in an AD 761 ceremony) are found in the ruined and unrestored Edificio 22. Next door is the famous **Building 23** that housed four major lintels portraying Shield-Jaguar I and his wife Lady Xoc in several bloodletting rituals. Only one remains on site – two are currently housed in the British Museum and a third is in the Maya Room in the Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City. Between Edificio 21 and 22 a majestic stairway leads to Edificio 33. The last steps on this majestic staircase have delicately rendered carvings of a ball game. Edificio 33, with its intact roof-comb, is the best-preserved building in this area. Inside is a headless statue of a king, a victim of looters who continue to plague the site. Farther afield are Edificios 39, 40 and 41, the highest point at the site. Edificio 40 still has part of its cresting and traces of interior wall paintings and Edificio 41 has carved stairs and stelae describing the victories of Shield-Jaguar I. It offers a wonderful bird's-eye view of the jungle and river.

PALENQUE

Palenque is one of the most beautiful Maya cities, exuding an ethereal atmosphere. It's set amid rolling hills in thick rainforest and the ruins are often shrouded in lacy mist. Artifacts found here have established that the city was founded as early as 300 BC. However, most buildings were constructed during the Classic Maya period (AD 300-900) with exquisitely rendered architecture and unique carvings. The majority were created by Palenque's most famous king, Pacal, who ruled from AD 615-680 and brought the city to prominence. His son Chan-Balum continued the legacy and added other beautiful monuments.

HISTORY

Palenque has been discovered several times. Its first visitors were the **Conquistadors**, who forgot about the ruins. Other explorers came and went from 1773 until the mid-1800s. In 1841, **Stephens** and **Catherwood** arrived and recorded the splendor, gaining the site an international reputation. Since then, it has received the extensive excavation and reconstruction efforts on 35 of its structures. There are an estimated 500 more buildings waiting to be unveiled.

EXPLORING THE RUINS

The most famous building is the **Temple of the Inscriptions**, erected in AD 692. In 1948, Alberto Ruz removed four curious stone plugs in the floor of the temple and discovered a secret passage filled with rubble. It took four years to clean out the passage. Underneath was a stairway leading to a platform 80 feet (24 meters) below the temple floor. Behind a triangular slab door lay a stone chamber that housed an elaborately carved sarcophagus. The crypt contained a skeleton covered with jade ornaments and other precious jewels. This was the burial site of the famous King Pacal. The lid of his sarcophagus showed Pacal hurtling through the cosmos on his way to Xilbalba – the Maya underworld. This carving is the most famous image of the ancient Maya and is often reproduced.

Carving of Pacal the Great

View of ruins taken from atop a pyramid

Next door is the **Royal Palace**. Built over a gigantic platform measuring 328 x 246 feet (100 x 75 meters), it houses steam baths and water pipes. Researchers believe it was a royal residence. The Palace tower is thought to have been used as an astronomical observatory. A variety of passageways lead to courtyards decorated with huge faces and stelae.

South of the palace, across a small stream, is the Grupo de la Cruz (Cross Group). This was the legacy of Chan Balum, Pacal's eldest son and successor, who continued the construction begun by his father. He built three glorious temples located on a hillside that have many famous carvings. **Temple of the Sun** has a well-preserved roof comb and carvings inside commemorating Chan-Balum's birth in AD 635. A smaller structure, **Templo XIV**, shows Chan-Balum dancing next to his mother emerging from the Underworld after he has successfully defeated the Lords of Death. The Temple of the Cross has a carved lintel of the Smoking God L standing next to Chan-Balum. This is a famous image of the Maya world. The most southern building is **Temple of the Foliated Cross**. It has lost its entire front wall, but retains its vault and corbel arches.

WHERE TO STAY

There are basic accommodations on both sides of the river. In Bethel, Guatemala, try **Posada Maya Bethel**, ☎ *502/7-801-1799 or 7-801-1800, Q63.* This small eco-lodge on the banks of Río Usumacinta offers charming wooden cabañas with thatched roofs in the rainforest. Each of the cabins has room for up to four people with shared bath. There is also an area for tents or hammocks. A restaurant serves good, simple food. The hotel offers tours along the river, a visit to the Bethel *cenote* and trips to the ruins of El Mirador, Piedras Negras, Yaxchilán and Bonampak.

A companion project, **Escudo Jaguar Eco-tourism Center**, *Frontera Corozal, Municipal Ocòsingo, Chiapas,* ☎ *52/15/147-9300, 15 cabins,*

$$, is on the Mexican side of the river. Cabins are set in the jungle and each one has two double beds and hot water. The hotel offers tours along the river as well as to Yaxchilán and Bonampak. They can also arrange transportation to Palenque.

There are **campgrounds** at Yaxchilán. Arrangements must be made through Escudo Jaguar, above, ahead of time to use the facilities.

The town of Palenque, close to the ruins, has numerous hotels. Reservations are not needed there.

Sayaxché & Petexbatún Lagoon

How did a civilization as sophisticated as the Maya manage to crash and burn so rapidly? The answer appears to be located in this southern region, referred to by archeologists as the **Kingdom of Petexbatún**. There are at least seven major cities in the area, scattered around Petexbatún Lagoon and Río de la Pasión. The ruins uncovered so far are filled with historical accounts of ongoing battles in the area. Archeologists believe these campaigns may have been responsible for the downfall of the Maya. Visiting these ancient battlefields offers a chance to explore an area that is still very much a frontier.

SAYAXCHÉ

Located on Río de la Pasión, Sayaxché is enjoying a boom in visitors thanks to the newly paved highway extending from Flores to this scruffy outpost. La Pasión is one of the major rivers in this area, flowing north to Río Usumacinta on the northwestern Guatemala-Mexico border and south to Río Chixoy and Salinas. This system of rivers was a major trade route for the Maya. Locals traded quetzal feathers, jaguar skins, jade and pottery for goods from the north such as salt, honey and shells. The river is still used as a trade route, moving a variety of goods (some legal, some not) throughout the area. Sayaxché is the last town before the road ends and the jungle begins.

GETTING HERE

There are no direct **bus** routes to Sayaxché. Catch a bus to Santa Elena or Flores and then transfer to a local bus. Except for the first six miles (9½ km) or so, the road is quite smooth. The actual town is on the other side of the river from the highway, so you'll need to jump on a **ferry**. The ride takes about five minutes and costs Q3. Local boats for hire to visit La Ceiba (up the river) or Aguateca (down the river) are available alongside the ferry docks on both sides of the river. Check the listings in the Saxayché section (page 350) for travel agencies that can arrange tours to the nearby ruins.

Ferry over Río de la Pasíon

MAYA RUINS

CEIBAL

Ceibal sits high on a hill overlooking Río de la Pasión. It's seven miles (11 km) west of Sayaxché. This site has some superb stelae from the Postclassical period. Most notable are the ceramic clay vessels found with painted figures of men and women as well as some with anthropomorphic figures. Some of the pottery dates back to 800 BC.

History

Ceibal was settled as far back as 800 BC. It reached its peak between AD 700 and 900 at a time when other cities were collapsing. It is thought Ceibal survived because of an alliance with the Putuns, Western invaders who came during the Late Classic period. Several of the stelae found at the Ceibal site show elements of the Putun style. Other monuments outline continuous battles with its neighbors – Dos Pilas, Aguateca and Altar de Sacrificios. Some ended badly for Ceibal. One stele marks an AD 735 war campaign in which King Yich'ak Balam is captured and eventually sacrificed by the rulers of Dos Pilas. His death marked the beginning of a 60-year subjection to Dos Pilas. Despite this, Ceibal outlasted its oppressor and remains a vital city until well after AD 930 – long after Tikal, Piedras Negras and Copán were abandoned.

> GETTING HERE: *There are two routes to the site. You can take a 1½-hour boat ride up Río de la Pasión from Sayaxché. This does not take you to the actual ruin – there is a one-mile (1.6 km) hike from the river to the ruins. The second route is along the new highway running directly from Sayaxché to the site. This is the more direct route, but you must have a car or hire a taxi. There is no public transportation.*

Exploring the Ruins

Groomed ruins, El Ceibal

Ceibal is composed of three ceremonial centers distributed over three hills. Thirty-one monuments sculpted with hieroglyphics have been counted. The majority are found in Group A, which has 15 stelae and nine panels covered with inscriptions. **Structure A-3** is the most famous building. It is made up of rooms facing from north to south, each with its own staircase. The stairways date back to AD 830 and each has a sculpted monument at its base. In the middle room is an altar and the spectacular Stele 21. **Structure C-79**, in Group C, has an unusual 10-foot (three-meter) circular platform with an altar in front sculpted in the form of a jaguar. This altar is atypical for this area.

Two stelae located next to the Main Temple show individuals dressed in costumes that are not typical to the area. Their faces are not Maya and this has led to speculation that Ceibal had foreign allies or that foreigners settled the area. Another stele nearby shows a king dressed in the Classic Maya style, holding his staff upside-down with his right hand on his chest in a gesture of submission. On his right is a stranger with long hair gripping a curved club. Historians believe this may commemorate the surrender of Ceibal to invaders.

ALTAR DE SACRIFICIOS

Altar de Sacrificios (Altar of Sacrifices), a small ceremonial center, is four hours southwest of Ceibal near Río Usumacinta on the Mexican border of Chiapas. Many of its buildings remain unrestored. This site is renowned for its enormous stone altars and numerous burial sites. Mummified bodies were found here wearing ceramic face plates, a rare find. Another unusual aspect to these ruins are the sandstone stele; most Maya sites used limestone.

The small size of this ceremonial center did not prevent it from becoming the capital of the Petexbatún Kingdom in AD 455. It offered a strategic location on the major trade route between the Usumacinta and Río de la Pasión, where it joins Río Chixoy. The community's golden period was between AD 613 and 771, when a variety of temples and stelae were produced. The last recorded date at this site is AD 910. You must hire a guide to reach this site. Travel is usually by horse or, if weather permits, by jeep.

PUNTA DE CHIMINO FORTIFICATION

Punta de Chimino (Chimino Point) is an artificial island created by the Late Classic Maya. This club-shaped peninsula was fortified against the outside world when the inhabitants cut three great trenches from the surrounding bedrock. They added high ramparts to create the first defended fort in the Maya world (no other such site has been found). It is known by archeologists as the "fortress city." The site was overlooked until 1989, when archeologist Arthur Demarest explored the massive trench. He measured it at 450 x 50 feet (137 x 15 meters), and estimated that the Maya would have moved as much rock as it would take to build the pyramid at Tikal. This was a huge achievement, considering the engineering logistics and location.

Obviously, the fort was some kind of refuge for a people under siege – ancient spearheads have been found imbedded into the walls. Inside the city, buildings were hastily erected, suggesting the residents had little time to build and were focusing on defending the fort. It dates back to AD 900. Although the site is now on private property (see the description of Chiminos Lodge below), visitors are still welcome to visit.

> GETTING HERE: *Boats can be hired in Sayaxché. The trip down the river takes about one hour. The tour is often combined with a visit to either Aguateca or Dos Pilas.*

AGUATECA

Aguateca rests on a plateau 623 feet (190 meters) above Petexbatún Lagoon bordered by cliffs to the east and a 200 x 125-foot (61 x 38-meter) natural gorge to the west. In 2002, a huge restoration project began that will restore a number of temples in several plazas. The real treasures in this site are the wonderfully preserved stelae that chronicle the city's victories. There is still a lot of research to be done.

History

Aguateca's history is still somewhat unknown. It appears to have been settled as far back as 200 BC and pottery shards indicate it was occupied well into the Late Classic period. Around AD 740 the inhabitants began building up the natural deep gorge into huge walls that surrounded the city and outlying fields. One popular theory suggests that the rulers of Dos Pilas fled to Aguateca when that city was sacked. Whoever was in the city fought a long battle as the area is littered with arrowheads and skeletal remains. The fight consumed most of their resources; the last recorded date on this site is from AD 790. No new homes or pyramids were built after that time, and there's no pottery dating from the period. The walls did not stop invaders from passing into the city and it was abandoned shortly after AD 797. It is thought the survivors escaped to Punta de Chimino.

Stone stela, main plaza, Aguateca

GETTING HERE: *Aguateca is one hour down Río de la Pasión. Two tour agencies offer trips to the ruins for as little as Q100, depending on the number of people (see Tours, page 350). Boats can be hired in Sayaxché at a cost of $60 per day for up to six people.*

Exploring the Ruins

Most of the stelae at Aguateca is found in the **Plaza Hundida** (Sunken Plaza), parts of which date to 200 BC. **Structure M7-26**, believed to be an administrative building just north of the plaza, is where an interesting mix of artifacts and pottery shards was found. It also has the remains of 12 pillars along its entrance stairway and a wall-to-wall bench. Nearby, seven stelae show intricately carved nobles dressed in their finery. The most recent date on them is AD 797, just before the city was abandoned. A few structures have been burnt and archeologists believe the city was abandoned very quickly.

Tours also include a hike through the spectacular natural gorge.

Nacimiento (Birth)

This is the most recently discovered site in the Petexbatún area. It's 1½ miles (2.4 km) south of Aguateca. It was discovered by local farmers who were using the slash-and-burn method on their land. Underneath their fields was this ruin. No excavations have taken place. Until stelae are uncovered revealing the true name, the site has been dubbed

Nacimiento for the fresh water found close by. Archeologist Marcus Eberl believes this site will be an important find for learning more about how the wars affected the cities. Takeshi Inomata, director of the Aguateca site, is also working on this site and has found a few stelae vastly different from other nearby locations. Ceramics and other artifacts are gradually being uncovered. Unfortunately, there is evidence of past robberies at this site.

> GETTING HERE: *Tours must be arranged with a guide from Sayaxché. Usually, this site is visited along with Aguateca. See page 350 for a list of tour companies.*

DOS PILAS

Dos Pilas (Two Pools) is 10 miles (16 km) southwest of Sayaxché. It was named for the two pools nearby the ruins. Dos Pilas is home to the famous **Great Hieroglyphic Staircase** that was so important in deciphering the history of the Petexbatún Kingdom. It's a difficult site to reach, but worth the effort as you'll see some of the best stelae in the Maya world.

History

Dos Pilas is a Late Classic site inhabited from AD 600 onwards. Researchers believe its first ruler, **Ruler I**, may have been a rebel king from Tikal who started up the city in protest. Glyphs found at Tikal mention attacks by Dos Pilas beginning around AD 600. **Ruler II** ascended the throne in AD 690 and he proved to be even more ambitious than his father. He sent his sister to marry nobility at Naranjo and his daughter to the king at Tamarindito. Then, from AD 698-726, he launched an unprecedented war campaign that ignored the tradition of seasonal war (which finished in time for the harvest) and changed the role of war in the Maya world. Dos Pilas had many victories. Soon the whole region was infected with this new idea of limitless battles as other kings responded in kind. Agricultural production began to suffer.

Ruler III continued building the Dos Pilas empire by first marrying royalty from the city of Cancuén and then launching another war campaign. In AD 735 he attacked and conquered Ceibal, defeating Jaguar Paw Jaguar. Dos Pilas would rule Ceibal for the next 60 years. By AD 741 Dos Pilas controlled the whole area, including the lucrative trade route along Río de la Pasión. During the Late Classic period, subservient states rose up against Dos Pilas and attacked the city, defeating it and beheading Ruler IV. Hieroglyphs found at the nearby site of Tamarindito outline the attack. It is thought that the nobility escaped first to Aguateca and then to Punta de Chimino.

Recently, Dos Pilas participated in an experimental project. Replicas of the stelae made from crushed stone and fiberglass were placed at the site and the originals were taken to museums under security. The replicas are intended to cut down on pilfering, which remains a huge problem in the area. The pilot project is expected to continue for the next several years.

> GETTING HERE: *Dos Pilas is not a ruin you can visit on your own. A guide is mandatory, since the dense jungle trail that leads to ruins takes three hours by horseback and even longer on foot. During the rainy season, it can be done only on horseback. Plan on a complete day for the tour (six hours of traveling time and two hours to visit the ruins). You can book a tour in Sayaxché with one of the travel agencies. See the Tours section page 350 for more information.*

Exploring the Ruins

Most of Dos Pilas remains unexcavated and over 492 mounds have been identified so far. Excavated structures include several pyramids, a palace, multiple platforms and two concentric walls. But Dos Pilas is most famous for its rich legacy of **carvings**: 16 well-preserved stelae, 19 altars, 19 panels, a hieroglyphic bench and four hieroglyphic stairways. The most famous staircase is the **Great Hieroglyphic Staircase**, located at the foot of the main pyramid. Beautifully executed carvings outline the many war victories of Ruler I and it remains one of the finest examples of Maya monumental art. Another delicately carved stele by the main plaza tells the history of Ruler II's birth, accession to the throne, war victories and his burial. This stele also revealed the location of his tomb. Inside the main plaza the body of Ruler II was found adorned with jade jewelry and surrounded by ceramic artifacts.

One of the most common images at Dos Pilas are depictions of captives kneeling at the feet of the king. The most famous is a stele over 15 feet (4½ meters) tall. It shows Ruler III dressed in jaguar boots, his neck adorned with human skulls, standing atop the bound and naked ruler from Ceibal who was sacrificed at a later date. Close by is the **Red Stele**, so named for its red, blue and yellow colored stucco. The latest finds include another **tomb** filled with ceramic artifacts probably belonging to another of the city's rulers, and a well-preserved 20-foot (six-meter) stele of either Ruler II or III at the height of his reign.

Fortifications began around AD 760. The remains of two concentric walls encircle the ceremonial plaza using stones from Ruler II's tomb. Using a ruler's tomb to build a wall suggests that the residents were either desperate for building material or Ruler II had fallen into disgrace and was being blamed for the city's downfall. The earliest part of the wall was built when attacks first began. The numerous skulls and spearheads scattered nearby support this theory. It appears that the Great Hieroglyphic Staircase was buried at this time, but it is not known whether this was an act of protest or done to preserve the stelae.

Dos Pilas also has a series of caves that appear to be have been used for human sacrifice. Cueva de la Sangre (Cave of Blood) had a huge cache of skeletons alongside an altar blackened with incense and strewn with objects used in ritual bloodletting. Two other caves, El Murciélago (Bat) and El Duende (the Dwarf) contained similar objects.

TAMARINDITO

Tamarindito is six miles (9½ km) from Río de la Pasión and halfway on the trail to Dos Pilas. Only a few stelae have been excavated, so there isn't much to see here. However, the location in the jungle among giant trees is quite outstanding. Tamarindito is considered a minor site, and is more than likely a satellite of Dos Pilas and Ceibal.

ADVENTURES ON WATER

Petexbatún Lagoon is home to a variety of birds, such as toucans, parrots, eagles and vultures. **River trips** offer a chance to see Canadian ducks, herons, storks and egrets. Many of the boatmen also act as jungle guides and can take you to the best birdwatching places in the forest and along the rivers. Prices vary according to the length of the trip and the number of people involved.

Río de la Pasión has good **fishing**. Although there are no formal fishing tours offered, you can rent a boat and guide at the dock in Sayaxché for $60 per day for up to six people.

TOURS

The simplest way to visit most of the ruins is to take a tour with one of the local travel agencies. The price usually includes the boat and a guide. The larger your group, the cheaper the price. Speak with the owner for rates or discounts.

Viajes Turísticos La Moñtana, on the main street, near the ferry in Sayaxché, ☎ 502/7-928-6169, fax 7-928-6168. Owner: Julian Mariona. Prices: Ceibal, US $60 for up to five people; Aguateca, US $70 for up to eight passengers. A combination trip takes four days and three nights. It covers Ceibal, Dos Pilas and Aguateca for US $300 per person (minimum four people).

Viajes Don Pedro, on the riverbank in Sayaxché, ☎ 502/7-928-6109. Owner: Don Pedro Mendéz Requena. Prices: Ceibal, Q350 for up to five people, Q525 for up to 10 people; Aguateca, Q425 up to four people, Q550 up to 10 people; Dos Pilas, Q500 for up to five people, Q625 for up the 10 people. River tours are Q350 for up to five people, Q525 for up to 10 people. Their Combination Trip (four days, three nights) covers , Aguateca, Ceibal and Dos Pilas with pick-up and drop-off at Flores for Q3,000 per person (maximum four people).

WHERE TO STAY

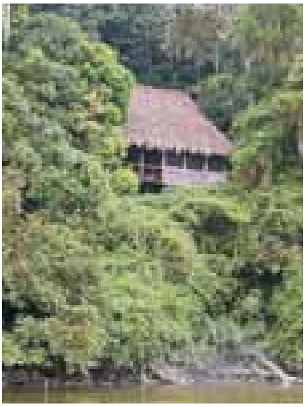
HOTEL PRICE CHART

Prices are per person

$	under US $25
$$	US $26-50
$$$	US $51-85
$$$$	US $86-125
$$$$$	over US $125

Hotels in Sayaxché and the surrounding area are either high-end or budget, with little in-between.

Chiminos Island Lodge, *Arroyo Petexbatún, ☎ 502/2-335-3506, fax 502/335-2647, www.chiminosisland.com, 5 bungalows, $$$ (including 3 meals per day).* Chiminos Island Lodge, located on the ancient Maya fortification of Punta Chiminos, offers a chance to experience pristine rainforest in style and comfort. Five mahogany bungalows on stilts with thatched roofs are nestled in the jungle overlooking Petexbatún Lagoon. With crisp linens, wooden furniture, bamboo decorations and private baths (also with lagoon views), this eco-lodge is both rustic and sophisticated. Jungle paths lead to the main dining room where gourmet meals are created by a well-known chef. There is also a small but comfortable lounge with hammocks.



You can follow trails to the remains of Punta de Chimino (see page 346) or birdwatch. A variety of bird species use the island as their nesting grounds. A floating dock can be used for fishing, sunbathing or swimming. During the dry season (February-June) when the river is low, Río de la Pasión is easily navigated by canoe (offered free of charge). The owner, Mynor Pinto, is a charming and affable host. He is also an expert on the local ruins and can help plan your visits. His staff is top-notch and will happily attend to your every need. Tours to the ruins of Dos Pilas, Aguateca and Ceibal are offered at reasonable rates.

The lodge does take some traveling to reach. Take a bus from Flores to Sayaxché. Go to Café Flors by the river's edge and they arrange for the lodge to pick you up. It's a 1½-hour ride downriver to the lodge. They also offer a helicopter service, which you must arrange ahead of time. Your transportation costs are not included in the hotel fee. Prices start at $45.

Posada Caribe, *Arroyo de Petexbatún, ☎/fax 502/7-928-6114, www.posadacaribe.com, 7 rooms, $$-$$$.* Located a short distance down from the river alongside the lagoon, this hotel offers small cabins in the rainforest. Cabins are clean, but rather empty, with private bathrooms

and limited hot water. The rooms come with kitchen privileges, or you can sign up for a special room-and-board package. Don Julián Mariona can make arrangements to see any of the nearby ruins. He's lived in area for many years and knows all the tour guides and boatmen. He also runs Viajes Turisticos La Montana travel agency in town.

Hotel Guayacán, *south side of the river by dock, ☎ 502/7-926-6111, 19 rooms, $-$$.* This hotel has the best view in town from its attractive terrace. Rooms are very basic and have either a double bed or two singles, overhead fans and small but clean bathrooms with *no water* any time of the day. Cheaper rooms share a bath. A restaurant here serves good food.

Hotel Posada Seguro, *at the end of first street up from dock, ☎ 502/7-928-6162, $$.* This is the best budget hotel in town. Rooms are clean and all have overhead fans. The beds are comfortable, but there's no hot water.

WHERE TO EAT

The food in this area is very simple. A typical meal will be soup, chicken and rice with vegetables or beans. Vegetarians or those on a special diet are out of luck.

Restaurant Guayacán, *south side of the river up from the dock*, has a decent menu of soups, sandwiches and a variety of grilled meats. Occasionally, they have fresh fish. Q20-35.

La Moñtana Restaurant, *beside Bank Banoro,* has excellent roast chicken, good sandwiches and, sometimes, fresh fish. Q15-30.

Restaurant Yaxkin, *a half-block from dock*, offers family-style cooking with huge, hearty servings of stews, soups and a variety of meats.

Southeast of the Maya Biosphere

POPTÚN

Poptún is a municipality made up of 17 small Maya communities. Poptún, the city, is located exactly halfway between Flores and Río Dulce. This area is at the foothills of the Maya Mountains that extend into Belize, and it offers a number of limestone caves in the pine forests and surrounding jungle. Two major rivers – the **Machaquilá** and **Mopán** – provide great swimming and waterside camping. Poptún itself doesn't have much to offer, but a number of lovely eco-lodges offer interesting accommodations and great tours of the area. This is a good place to stop and catch your breath while traveling from Guatemala City to Flores or to Río Dulce.

IXCÚN & IXTONTÓN MAYA RUINS

Both of these small ruins are part of the 10-year-old Archaeological Atlas of Guatemala (*Atlas Arqueologico de Guatemala*) project that is gradually mapping the 200 archeological sites in the southeastern Petén. Both sites have received only an initial excavation. Ixcún is half an hour from Poptún near the village of Dolores. It has several nice stelae dating back to AD 790. Stele 1 shows a ruler in ceremonial garb, complete with a headdress of quetzal feathers. It's set alongside a large ceremonial center with three plazas, an unrestored temple and an acropolis. Several other unrestored structures can be seen in the South Group. The site appears to have been abandoned in AD 800. Ixtontón, a sister city, is four miles from Ixcún along Río Mopán. Initial excavations and research have led archeologists to believe it was major political power and central trading center occupied well into the 11th century. More work is required before the full history can be deciphered.

ADVENTURES ON FOOT

CAVING

There are dozens of caves in this area. However, unless you are an experienced caver, it's best to hire a local guide. Many of the caves are located in the jungle and reached along trails that are difficult to follow. Your hotel can make the necessary arrangements for you. Guided tours usually start at Q50 per person. The only equipment needed is a good sturdy pair of shoes and a flashlight. If you want to go spelunking, you'll need to bring along your own equipment.

Drawings, Naj Tunich

Naj Tunich Caves

The Naj Tunich caves are 18 miles (29 km) outside the town of

Poptún. They were discovered in 1979. From top to bottom, the cave's sheer rock walls measure 1.8 miles (three km) long and are covered with sacred texts and ancient Maya drawings. People must have painted these markings while suspended from ropes or ladders. The Naj Tunich caves are considered one of the finest examples of ancient Maya cave art and are still considered a sacred entrance to the underworld, Xilbalba, where nine lords reigned. Sadly, vandals defaced some of the paintings in 1989 and some of the caves were closed. They have only recently been opened and all visitors must obtain a special permit from IDAEH to enter. Most local guides have permission to enter and can supply you with your permit. You can't go on your own.

San Miguel Caves

Two caves are located near the unexcavated ruin of San Miguel, 15 miles (24 km) from Poptún. The **Cave of the Offerings** (*Cueva de la Ofrecimiento*) was named for the many ceramics and other objects discovered alongside handprints on the walls. The **Cave of the Paintings** (*Cueva de la Pinturas*) has several charcoal drawings of human and animal figures with geometrical designs. The trail to this cave is difficult to navigate. Hire a guide. Contact Finca El Tapir or Villa de los Castellenos (pages 355-356) for specifics.

Las Conchas Caves

Las Conchas are a series of caves just off Río Machaquilá. The most impressive is **River Cave**, which has spectacular underground rapids and waterfalls.

Ixobel Cave has some fantastic limestone stalactites and stalagmites. **Echoing Cave** is found along a jungle path and has several hidden chambers and caverns. These caves are close to the Finca Ixobel, ☎ 502/7-927-7363, which offers tours (see pages 355). Prices range from Q15 to Q65 per person.

MACHAQUILÁ FOREST RESERVE

Machaquilá Forest Reserve extends from the village of the same name along Río Machaquilá to some small ruins. The river is an excellent place to swim, with a moderate current and small rapids. Most of the eco-lodges in the area offer guided tours and rent inner tubes for floating along in the river. Trips usually include lunch and transportation and cost about Q85. See *Where to Stay,* below.

The **Machaquilá Ruins** are notable for the finely preserved stelae found here. Not much has been revealed about the nature of this city. The nobility seen on the stelae are richly adorned with jade and other precious metals, suggesting this may have been a prosperous trading center. On Stele 1, dating from AD 630, a young nobleman stands grasping a scepter adorned with jewels and jade. His clothes are heavily embroidered and he is crowned with immense plumes from the quetzal bird. Another carving shows K'inich Chakt'e Ha Ho'Bak, the fourth governor of Machaquilá, wearing a headdress with images of the Maya God Chaac while holding a scepter. There are 106 glyphs on this stele. From what has been deciphered so far, they appear to tell the history of the birth and ascent to the throne of a leader known as Bacab. More research is needed with these glyphs, since Bacab was also a god in the underworld. Also in the glyph is reference to a total eclipse of the sun on June 26, AD 800. The city appears to have been abandoned shortly after that date.

ADVENTURES ON HORSEBACK

This area is a combination of pine forest and savanna, making it perfect country for horseback riding. Jungle horseback treks range from short two-hour trips to all-day rides and overnight excursions. They all follow the same trails, and the overnight trips go farther into the jungle to a small camping area by Río Machaquilá. A day-trip usually includes lunch and beverages, while an overnight trip includes hammock, camping gear and all meals. Costs are Q70 for a two-hour trip, Q150 for the all-day trip and Q350 for an overnight trip. Book with **Finca Ixobel**, ☎ 502/5-410-4307, or **Villa de los Castellanos**, ☎ 502/7-927-7541.

Finca Ixobel also offers a three- or four-day jungle and camping trek that goes deep into the unspoiled jungle. You travel to the campgrounds by horse and spend the next two days exploring on foot. A local guide offers a botanical tour of the forest where you will learn about the different kinds of plants and animals. You'll also explore a series of caves with Maya pottery and bones. Many have exotic names: **Cave of the Cemetery** (La Cueva del Cementerio), **Cave of the Sacrifice** (La Cueva del Sacrificio), and **Cave of the Mouse** (La Cueva del Ratón). You sleep in hammocks either inside a hut or strung between two trees (check with your guide first). Tasty campfire food is prepared Maya-style, over an open flame. This is an excellent adventure for those who like camping. The three-day trip costs US $75 and the four-day trip costs US $100 (there's a two-person minimum on both trips). Rates include horses, guides, food and all gear.

WHERE TO STAY & EAT

Dormitory, Finca Ixobel

Finca Ixobel, *3 miles south of Poptún, ☎ 502/5-410-4307, www.fincaixobel.com, 12 rooms, campgrounds, $$.* The very famous Finca Ixobel offers a variety of accommodations but, like many tourist zone hotels, it is often overcrowded and over-

Finca Ixobel's lake

priced (it even charges to swim in the river). Backpackers gather here in search of the camaraderie that has made Finca Ixobel so well known. The "cool" factor can get overwhelming at times. However, the surrounding pine forest at the foothills of the Maya Mountains is idyllic, and there's an excellent restaurant and bakery serving fresh bread and vegetarian food. Payment is on the honor system, where you cash in your tab upon departure. (Beware, as its adds up fast – average costs is Q100 per day.) The farm offers a number of tours – swimming, caving and horseback riding – at slightly higher prices than normal. If you are on a budget, check at some of the other eco-lodges for better prices. You will be isolated here and must pay for transportation coming and going (which is also overpriced).

TIP: The smaller hotels, especially those in the more remote areas, deal in local currency and do not accept credit cards. If you insist on paying with American dollars, the exchange rate will be lousy. Bring small denominations of quetzals. Reservations are not needed for the most part *unless* you are traveling during a very busy season, such as to Antigua during Holy Week or to Esquipulas during the January dedications to the Black Christ. Hotels also fill up during the annual patron saint celebrations, so before heading out, check to see whether your destination village has an event.

Villa de los Castellanos, *Village of Machaquilá, ☎ 502/7-927-7541, 12 rooms, $$.* This delightful eco-lodge is built on 12 acres of privately owned land right on the banks of Río Machaquilá. The cabañas are made with all natural materials and have thatched roofs, electricity, private baths and two or three double beds. The lodge was built around a lush botanical garden created by Dr Castellanos. It has the most extensive collection of tropical flowers in the area. The owners are devoted conservationists and guests are invited to participate in their reforestation programs. To date, the lodge has planted over 14,000 trees in the area, including Spanish cedar and mahogany. The lodge runs a variety of tours to nearby caves, a river-tubing trip and an excursion to Machaquilá Forest Reserve.

To read about the local flora and fauna in the area, pick up a copy of ***The Ecotraveller's Wildlife Guide, Belize and Northern Guatemala***, by Les Beletsky, Natural World Press.

Izabal

The department of Izabal has the only stretch of eastern coastline in Guatemala. Due to its proximity to Belize, the area has a distinct Caribbean feel and is perfect for all kinds of watersports, birding, fishing and jungle treks.

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Lake Izabal is located in the middle of the department. At 227 square miles (590 square km), it is the country's second-largest lake. It's fed by a number of tributaries, including Río Polochíc in the west and Río Dulce in the east. A number of small communities surround the lake. **El Estor** is the largest community on the northwest shore and the town of Río Dulce is the largest on the northeast corner. **El Golfete**, where Río Dulce widens into a bay and eventually meets the Caribbean, is where you will find the Garífuna village of **Lívingston**.

South, on the coast, is the **Bahía Amatiqué**, where the ports of **Puerto Barrios** and **Santo Tomás de Castillo** are found. At **La Ruidosa** the department turns inland toward Morales and Bananera, where the small but beautiful ruins of **Quiriguá** are buried amid banana plantations.

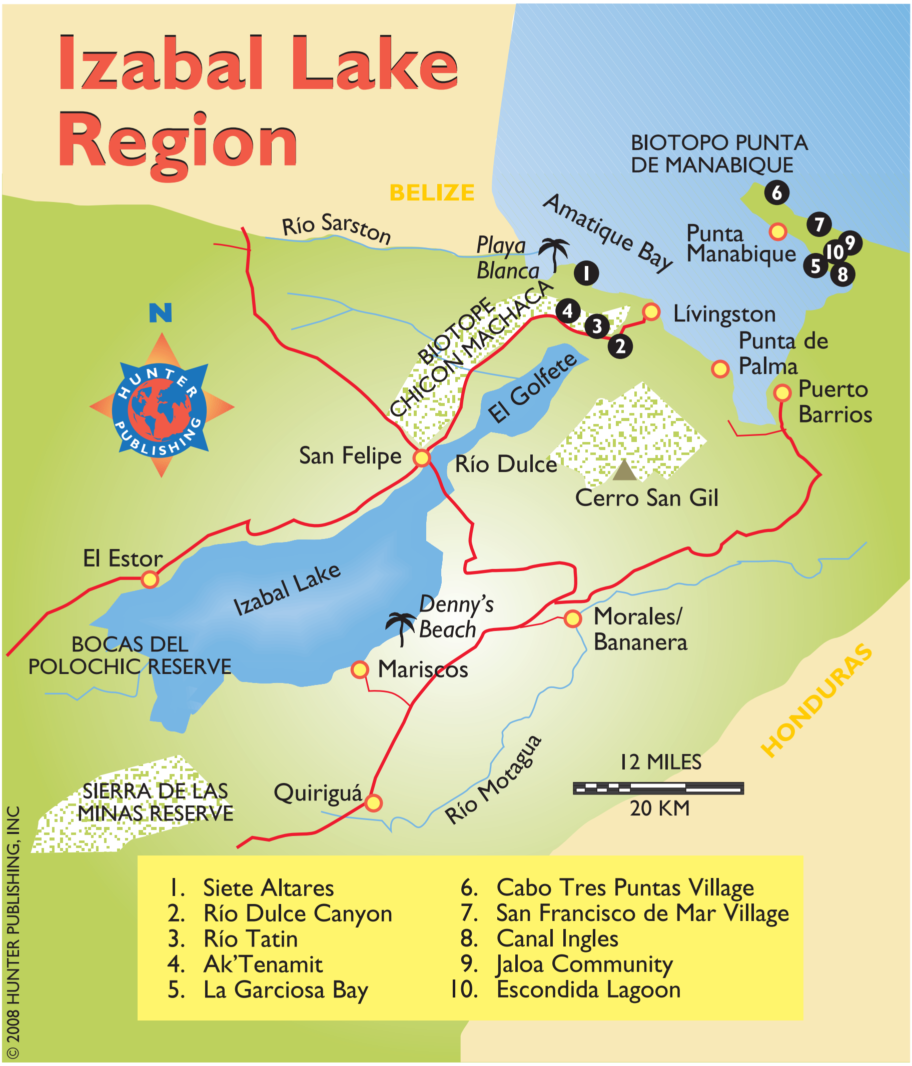
Since this department has both fresh water and the ocean, its main activities are water-oriented. There are miles of waterways to explore and you'll see many yachts moored in the bay. The Río Dulce has been declared a national park and is the gateway to exploring the Petén.

Río Dulce is, of course, a river. However, there is a town by the same name and, just for good measure, the entire area is referred to as Río Dulce

GETTING HERE & GETTING AROUND

Transporte Litegua, Lineo D'Oro and Fuente del Norte offer the best service to Izabal. If you are going to Río Dulce you will have to switch buses at either Morales or at Puerto Barrios. The trip to Río Dulce takes six hours, while the trip to Puerto Barrios is eight, unless you catch an express bus, which is six hours as well. Tickets are between Q25 and 40.

Transporte Litegua leaves Guatemala from the old train station at 19 Calle at 9 Av, Zona 1. They post their daily schedules on their website, www.litegua.com, but do not give out their phone number.


Izabal Lake Region
BELIZE
BIOTOPO PUNTA DE MANABIQUE
Amatique Bay
Río Sarston
Playa Blanca
Punta Manabique
Lívingston
Punta de Palma
Puerto Barrios
BIOTOPE CHICON MACHACA
El Golfete
San Felipe
Río Dulce
Cerro San Gil
N
HUNTER PUBLISHING
El Estor
Izabal Lake
BOCAS DEL POLOCHIC RESERVE
Denny's Beach
Mariscos
Morales/ Bananera
SIERRA DE LAS MINAS RESERVE
Quiriguá
Río Motagua
12 MILES
20 KM
HONDURAS
1. Siete Altares
2. Río Dulce Canyon
3. Río Tatin
4. Ak'Tenamit
5. La Garciosa Bay
6. Cabo Tres Puntas Village
7. San Francisco de Mar Village
8. Canal Ingles
9. Jaloa Community
10. Escondida Lagoon
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Fuente del Norte leaves from 7 Calle 8-46, Zona1. Buses leave for Izabal four times a day but you will have to check for the times at the station.

Linea D'Oro runs first-class bus service to Izabal. Buses leave three times a day from 17 Calle 9-36, Zona 1.

For shuttle services you can choose from:

Atitlán, 6a C corner of 5a Av #12D, ☎ 502/7-832-24168, corner 5a Calle Poniente #6, ☎ 502/7-832-2071, fax 502/7-832-1838, romeo_6@hotmail.com.

Sin Fronteras, 5a Av Norte #15A, ☎ 502/832-1017, fax 502/832-8453, www.sinfront.com.

Turansa, 9a Calle inside Hotel Villa Antigua, ☎ 502/7-832-2928, ☎/fax 502/7-832-4692, www.turansa.com.

Vision Travel, Av Norte #3, ☎ 502/7-832-3293 or 2-332-1962, fax 502/7-832-1955, www.guatemalainfo.com.

Río Dulce is reached by **Carreterra Atlántico**, CA-9, the main highway from Guatemala City that passes through Montagua Valley before heading north to the Río Dulce and, eventually, Flores. Most of the secondary roads in this department are in poor shape.

Local transportation is water-based. Dinghies, skiffs and *lanchas* (speedboats) serve as water taxis shuttling between hotels on the river or up to Lívingston. You won't have any difficulty finding a boat – in fact, the boatmen will approach you.

MORALES-BANANERA

HISTORY

The twin towns of Morales and Bananera are company towns created by the former **United Fruit Company** – Guatemala's original evil empire. When bananas made their way to America in 1890, there was no direct distributor. In 1899, the **Boston Fruit Company** approached railroad baron Minor C. Keith to form the United Fruit Company in order to set up a distribution network. They spoke with several countries in Central America and were granted huge tracts of land in Guatemala. They built a railroad, supplied jobs to the locals and promised to pay taxes. In the meantime, the company built a monopoly that was so powerful it controlled the very destiny of the country. It made Puerto Barrios its major port and all railroad lines led there. Of course, United Fruit controlled the lines and no one else had access to railroads or port without paying exorbitant rates. The company built a small city in the middle of the banana plantation just outside of Bananera. It had schools, shops and grand mansions, but workers lived in the town as virtual prisoners, working long hours in harsh conditions with low pay.

The caste system in place meant that whites were always deferred to and a Maya employee could be fired for not raising his hat in respect.

By 1930, the United Fruit had gained so much control over Guatemala's commerce, social system, politicians and economy that it was nicknamed *El Pulpo* (The Octopus). Like most evil empires, it took more than it gave, but its most heinous crime was interfering in Guatemala's democracy movement and setting the stage for the civil war. On October 20, 1944, Guatemala elected the liberal government of Jacobo Arnez, who was sympathetic to land reform, labor unions and free elections. The new government demanded that United Fruit Company start paying taxes (which it had avoided since it began its operations), improve working conditions and return large tracts of unused land to the government. United Fruit Company, frightened it might lose revenue, used political ties in Washington to convince the Eisenhower government that Guatemala was turning communist. In 1954, Congress backed a CIA invasion from Honduras that placed the right-wing dictator Carlos Castillo Armas back in power. Jacobo Arbenz was forced to flee the country, democracy was put on hold and United Fruit Company was back in the saddle. The invasion prompted an investigation by the US Department of Justice and, in 1958, United Fruit Company was forced to return some land and businesses to Guatemala. It merged with United Brands in 1960, but that company collapsed in 1972 and all holdings were sold to **Del Monte**. The subverted liberal movement was to resurface in the country as the leftist guerilla army.

Del Monte is still running the banana plantation, but now at least the workers are free to live where they wish and both wages and working conditions have improved. You can still see the plantation when you visit the ruins of Quiriguá, which also used to be owned by *El Pulpo*. Del Monte maintains its offices, housing, schools, medical facilities, a botanical research laboratory, an airstrip and a golf course.

QUIRIGUÁ RUINS

The small city of Quiriguá is the only ruin of its kind in Guatemala. Its giant 3-D stelae covered with exquisite Maya glyphs and zoomorphic carved stones closely resemble the ruins at Copán, Honduras. It is considered one of the most beautiful ruins and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Luckily for you, it remains one of the least-visited ruins in Guatemala.

HISTORY

The name Quiriguá is from the **Cakchiquel Maya**, meaning "sweet corn" or "sweet food" in reference to the fertile lands that surround the city. Little is known about the early history of this site. It appears to have been settled in the Late Preclassic period between 250 and 300 BC, quite possibly by the **Putun Maya**, who migrated from the north.

Hieroglyphics indicate that from AD 300-600 it was a satellite city of Copán. Valued for its trade route on the Río Motagua, Quiriguá developed into a trade center because of its close proximity to jade mines of the Sierra de Las Minas. The city reached its peak during the Late Classic period.

Main plaza

Quiriguá was an ideal location for carving, making use of the large brown sandstone deposits along the banks of the river. Carvers from Copán, Honduras, trained the artists of Quiriguá, which accounts for the similarities in style. There are a number of references to Quiriguá in the stelae of Copán, particularly those associated with the famous **18 Rabbit**. In AD 725, 18 Rabbit placed one of his protegees, **Cauac Sky**, on the throne in Quiriguá. Cauac returned the favor by declaring war on Copán and capturing 18 Rabbit in AD 737, eventually beheading him after keeping him captive for 18 years. Cauac Sky commemorated the beheading of 18 Rabbit and Quiriguá's independence from Copán on the giant stone Zoomorph G. This was one of the first public monuments he commissioned in his 38-year building campaign. He reigned for 60 years and gradually turned Quiriguá into the main power throughout the Motagua Valley. His son, **Sky Xul**, succeeded to the throne in AD 771 and ruled until AD 790 when he was challenged for the throne by Jade Sky. **Jade Sky** ruled from AD 790-840 and Quiriguá flourished during that time. Toward AD 870 the history of the city stopped being recorded and it was abandoned soon afterward.

Quiriguá remained untouched until 1841, when **John L. Stephens** visited. He described the ruins in his book, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatán* as, "unvisited, unsought, and utterly unknown." Stephens was so impressed with the carvings that he made plans to transport them back to New York. He conjured an elaborate scheme that involved floating the stones up Río Motagua to Puerto Barrios and on to New York by steamship. Fortunately, his plan was never realized as the owners of the site were asking more money than Stephens could afford.

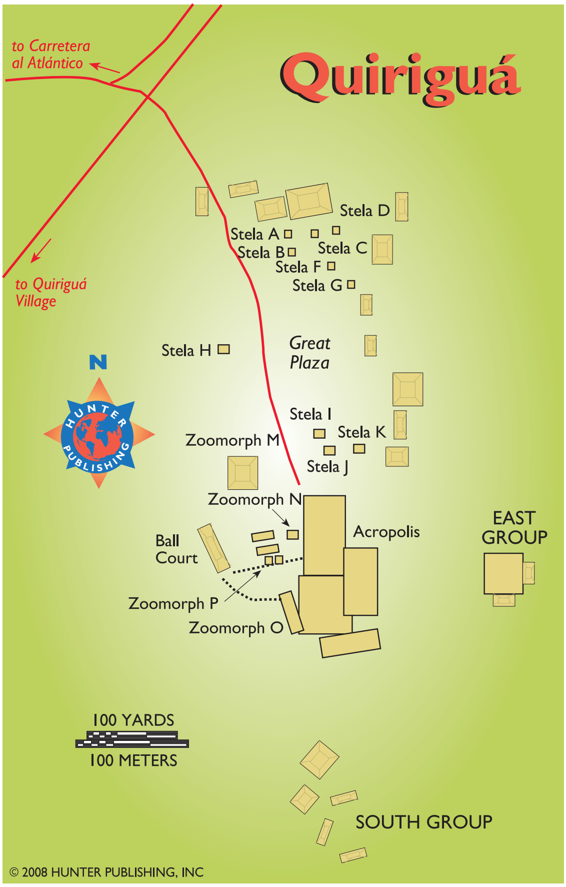
In 1899 the United Fruit Company bought the surrounding land and turned it into a banana plantation. Fortunately, some of its executives were amateur archeologists and they kept the central plaza from being plowed over. In 1910, they designated the area an archeological park and organized the first major excavations under the direction of **Dr. Edgar Lee Hewett** of the Archaeological Institute of America. In 1914, Dr. Hewett organized an expedition to make casts of the stelae at Quiriguá, which he then introduced at a 1915 exposition in San Diego. These replicas are still used to measure the erosion of the originals and are currently on display at the San Diego Museum of Man. Few excavations were done after that. However, because the site was located in the middle of the United Fruit compound it was well protected from looters. In 1978, the University of Pennsylvania completed a major restoration, and in 1981 UNESCO declared it a World Heritage Site.

> GETTING HERE: *The ruins are 43 miles (70 km) from the Río Hondo conjunction and 58 miles (94 km) from Puerto Barrios. They are located in the middle of the Del Monte banana plantation. There is no public bus service so you must either walk the 2½ miles (four km) or hitch a ride with one of the minibuses that serve the plantation. If you are coming from either Guatemala City or Puerto Barrios, ask to be let off at the Bananera Road to the Del Monte plantation, also known as the Ruins Road, just east of the turnoff for the nearby village of Los Amates. There is plenty of traffic at this crossroads so you shouldn't have to wait too long. A less complicated way to visit the ruins is to book a tour with one of the travel agencies in Río Dulce (see below).*

EXPLORING THE RUINS

Though smaller than Copán, Quiriguá has much larger stelae. **Stele E**, the largest carving found in the Maya world, stands 35 feet (10 meters) tall and weighs 65 tons. The carving, which can be seen throughout the site, is quite impressive and, for the most part, extremely well preserved. The monuments are two basic types – the tall stelae have human figures carved on both sides and hieroglyphic text on the sides, and large, low altars carved into animal shapes with inscriptions on their backs and sides. Each monument is made from a solid block of stone.

GREAT PLAZA: None of the buildings have been cleared, so the main focus is on the impressive carvings scattered around the Great Plaza in an area 328 x 262 feet (100 x 80 meters). Most depict King Cauac in various stages of his life. **Stele D** shows the face of Cauac encircled by gods and animals with glyphs running down the sides. The carvings are so wonderfully executed that this stele was chosen to appear on Guatemala's 10-centavo coin. The monolithic **Stele E** is completely covered with carvings and has a bearded figure wearing a giant feathered headdress. This beard has been the subject of much debate – the Maya don't grow beards. Many of the figures on this stele are full-length and are holding the double-sided scepter, a symbol of royalty. On one end is a


Quiriguá
to Carretera al Atlántico
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N
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Stela D
Stela A
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Stela C
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Stela G
Stela H
Great Plaza
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Stela K
Stela J
Zoomorph M
Zoomorph N
Acropolis
Ball Court
Zoomorph P
Zoomorph O
EAST GROUP
100 YARDS
100 METERS
SOUTH GROUP
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carving of Lord Chaac, god of water, while at the other end is the head of a great cosmic serpent. These stelae are so high that scaffolding may have been used to complete the carvings.

Another unusual feature of Quiriguá are the **zoomorphs**. These large blocks of stone have been carved with animal and human figures. **Zoomorph G**, in the center of the plaza, was carved in the shape of a jaguar and shows what is thought to be the beheading of Copán's 18 Rabbit. At the north end, Zoomorph P shows Lord Cauac sitting cross-legged in the mouth of a cosmic monster. Two other altars are carved in the shape of a frog and turtle. Archaeologists believe the zoomorphs were used as altars.

ACROPOLIS: The acropolis is located north of the Great Plaza. Steep stairs lead up to a spacious inner compound with the remains of four walls. This is thought to have been an administrative complex. At the north end are what's left of a palace inhabited by the various kings of Quiriguá. Multiple rooms with built-in benches are connected by passages. Most of the acropolis is devoid of carvings. The one exception is an elaborately decorated ball court wall showing images of K'inich Ahaw, the sun god.

Unrestored structures on the east side are thought to be the location of the old port of Quiriguá, where Río Motagua used to flow. The river has gradually migrated more than one mile from it original location.

The ruins themselves are quite small and can be seen in just under two hours. The main visitor center has a rather dull restaurant alongside an excellent little market selling souvenirs. The ruins are open from 8 am to 5 pm daily. Entrance fee is Q10 per person.

NOTE: Bring your bug spray and an umbrella. The mosquitoes are relentless here and short bursts of rain are the norm.

QUIRIGUA RUINS TOUR COMPANIES

An easy way to visit the ruins is to book a tour with one of the travel agencies in Río Dulce. Your ticket includes the entrance fee, lunch and transportation to and from the ruins. Carlos Chocón from **Atitrans Travel**, Turicentro Las Brisas, Río Dulce, ☎ 502/7-930-5111 or 7-416-9963, has the best prices. Tours start at Q120 per person, but vary according to the size of your group.

WHERE TO STAY & EAT

There aren't any hotels close to the ruins or in Bananeras. Most people visit the ruins and return the same day to nearby Río Dulce or Puerto Barrios. If you decide to spend the night, the closest hotels are in the nearby villages of Los Amates and Morales. Unfortunately, most options are dismal and depressing.

Hotel y Restaurante Santa Monica, *on the highway just before Los Amates by the gas station, ☎ 502/7-947-3602, 8 rooms, $.* This decent hotel has basic rooms with two double beds, cable TV and private bath that sometimes offer hot water. The restaurant serves hamburgers, hot dogs and other truck-driver specials. Since it's right on the highway, this hotel can get loud.

Hotel y Restaurante Royal, *a half-mile south of the highway turn off to ruins, ☎ 502/7-947-3639, 13 rooms, $$.* This bright, clean hotel with hot water and private rooms is geared toward people visiting the ruins. The restaurant serves simple, delicious meals, including vegetarian dishes.

MARISCOS

Mariscos is the only village on the south shore of Lake Izabal. It is primarily a fishing village, with few services for tourists. Guatemalans come here to visit the lovely **Playa Dorada** beach or to fish. The road to Mariscos is in terrible shape, so the bus trip is hellish. Most travelers take a boat over from Río Dulce. Playa Dorada has picnic area and a lovely shallow beach perfect for swimming. The waters remain calm until the afternoon winds pick up.

El Chapín is the small bay between Biotope Bocas del Polochíc and Playa Dorada. It's also known as The Refuge (*El Refugio*) because it's a well-protected anchorage used during storms. Several nearby lagoons are home to a number of birds and howler monkeys come to sit in the trees at sunrise and sunset. Hire a boat in either El Estor or Río Dulce to fully explore the bay. A tour should cost between Q250 to 300 for a boat and guide. Ask at the Río Dulce dock for a boat going to Playa Dorada or contact Denny's Beach, below, and take their boat.

WHERE TO STAY

Denny's Beach, *south side Lac Izabal,* ☎ *502/7-821-4707, call 502/5-398-0908, VHF channel 63, www.dennysbeach.com, 5 cabañas, $-$$.* The only option on the south side of the lake. Dennis and Lupe Guick run this casual and rustic retreat that features a number of cabañas tucked into the jungle. You can take a bed in the shared dormitory or rent a private cabaña with its own bath. A camping area on the beach has spots where you can pitch your tent or hang a hammock. After Playa Dora, this is the prettiest beach on the lake. The hotel offers horseback riding and tours of the lake, although the favored pastimes are beach volleyball or hammock-lounging. If you are in Río Dulce, you can contact the hotel via their VHF channel – it's the main communication system used here and radios are found everywhere – to arrange a pick-up. Plan to return to town one morning as afternoon winds often make a later return impossible.

PUERTO BARRIOS

HISTORY

Located on the lovely **Bahía de Amatiqué** (Amatiqué Bay), Puerto Barrios is the capital of the department of Izabal. It's a rather scrappy town where drunken sailors go to party. Originally built in 1880 by President Barrios, it was quickly taken over by the United Fruit Company, who turned it into Guatemala's main port. For over 50 years, ships from all over the world docked here and the government made a tidy profit off port taxes. (Of course, the United Fruit company paid nothing.) The elegant hotels and great restaurants of that time have since been replaced with strip bars and dance clubs.

The port's heyday ended when the United Fruit Company collapsed in the 1960s and a more modern port was built in Santo Tomás de Castilla, three miles (4.8 km) north. The new port quickly became the main shipping point for Guatemala, as well as the location for the Caribbean Naval base. Puerto Barrios has yet to come out of its tropical torpor, even though it remains the main port for the Del Monte corporation. You can watch giant containers of bananas being loaded onto cargo ships from the main dock in town.

Puerto Barrios is starting to enjoy a revival of sorts as a center for ecotourism in the area. It is the head office for Trinational Alliance for the Conservation of the Golf of Honduras (*Alianza Trinacional para la*

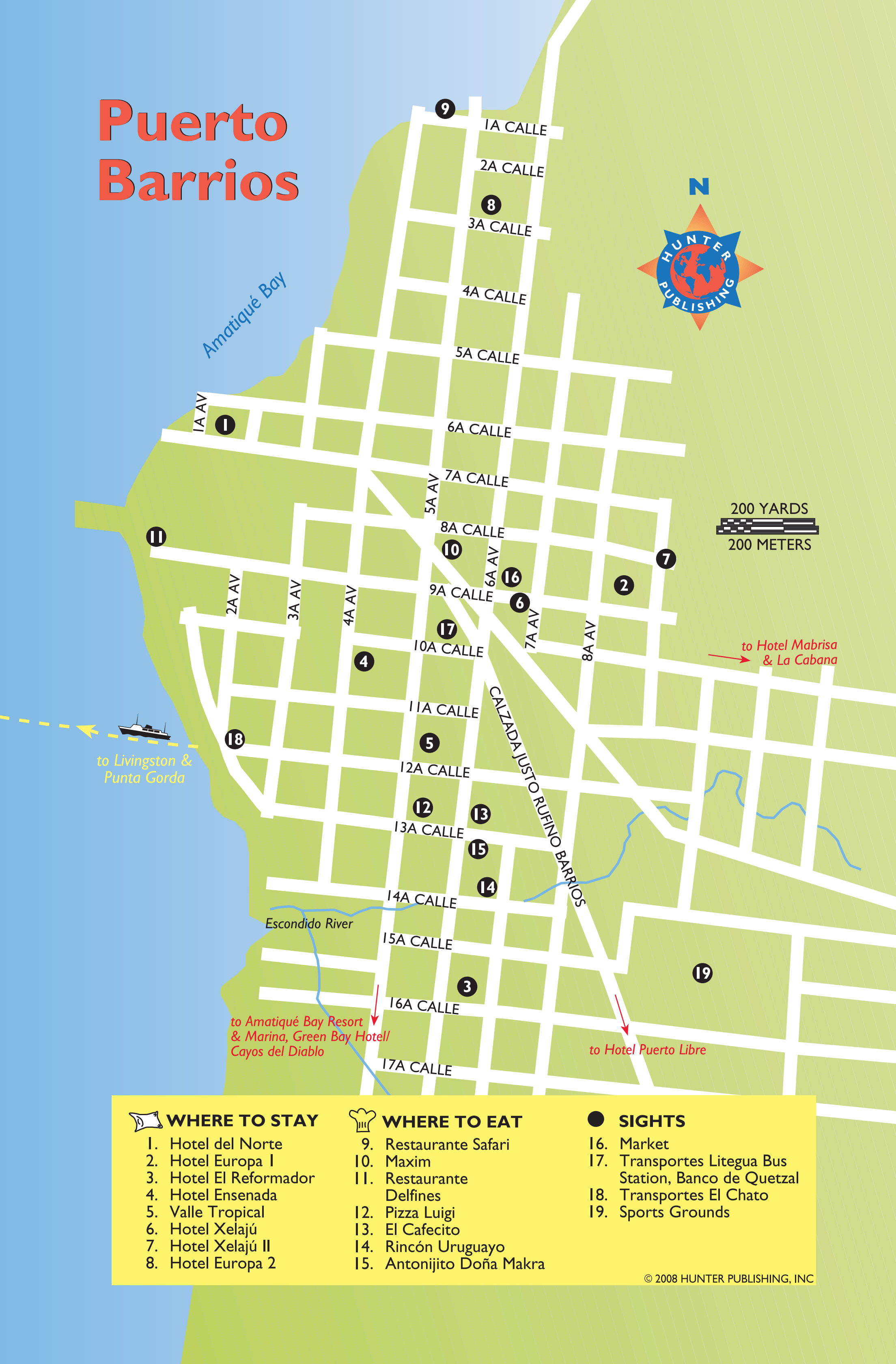
Conservacíon del Golfo de Honduras). This alliance between Honduras, Belize and Guatemala hopes to preserve ecosystems that are rich in biological diversity. Several of Guatemala's well-known eco-organizations participate in the program, including Fundación de los Defensores de la Naturaleza, Fundación para el Ecodesarrollo y la Conservacíonde (FUNDAECO) and Fundación Mario Dary (FUNDARY). Together, they are developing a number of interesting regional tours that incorporate trips to tropical cloud rainforests, barrier reefs and coastal villages.

Street, Puerto Barrios

GETTING HERE & GETTING AROUND

BY BUS: Direct buses leave from Guatemala City and Chiquimula every few hours. The whole trip takes about five hours. The trip from the city takes about six hours and from Chiquimula it's about four. From Flores or Río Dulce, take the Guatemala City bus and transfer at La Ruidosa junction to a local bus for another half-hour ride. It is only 45 minutes away from Río Dulce. The roads are all in good shape so the trip is a pleasant one.

Puerto Barrios


Amatiqué Bay
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CALZADA JUSTO RUFINO BARRIOS
Escondido River
to Livingston & Punta Gorda
to Hotel Mabrisa & La Cabana
to Amatiqué Bay Resort & Marina, Green Bay Hotel/ Cayos del Diablo
to Hotel Puerto Libre
1
2
3
4
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19

WHERE TO STAY

1. Hotel del Norte
2. Hotel Europa 1
3. Hotel El Reformador
4. Hotel Ensenada
5. Valle Tropical
6. Hotel Xelajú
7. Hotel Xelajú II
8. Hotel Europa 2

WHERE TO EAT

9. Restaurante Safari
10. Maxim
11. Restaurante Delfines
12. Pizza Luigi
13. El Cafecito
14. Rincón Uruguayo
15. Antonijito Doña Makra

● **SIGHTS**

16. Market
17. Transportes Litegua Bus Station, Banco de Quetzal
18. Transportes El Chato
19. Sports Grounds

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ADVENTURES ON FOOT

CERRO SAN GIL WILDLIFE RESERVE

The finest birding in the area is at this wildlife reserve near Santo Tomás. More than 300 bird species have been identified here, including the endangered crested eagle and solitary eagle. Cerro San Gil is part of the Mico mountain range that is actually a continuation of the Sierra Madre Mountains. Because it cuts off the breeze from the Caribbean Sea, the forest here is extremely humid and receives over 118 inches (300 cm) of rain over the 200-day rainy season. The combination of humidity, temperature and elevation has created a forest with unique species of flora and fauna. It is also the source of fresh water for much of the area. Over 7.4 miles (12 km) of trails lead through the jungle, passing by a number of natural wonders. **Río Las Escobas** winds through the reserve's virgin rainforest creating numerous waterfalls and small lagoons. **Balneario las Escobas** is an area with a number of small ponds that are ideal for swimming.

GETTING HERE: *The western edge of the reserve is accessed from San Marcos, 10 miles (16 km) north of the La Ruidosa junction off Highway CA-13. From the entrance it is 7.4 miles (12 km) to the village of Carboneras, where the visitor center is located. The eastern edge of the reserve is accessed from Bahía de Amatiqué just north of the port of Santo Tomás de Castillo.*

CERRO SAN GIL TOUR COMPANIES

Fundación para el Ecodesarrollo y la Conservacíonde (**FUNDAECO**) offers an excellent three-day, two-night tour for only Q200. Accommodations are at Chandler Robbins Biological Station, named after the famous author of the North American field guide to birds. The station has 12 dormitory-style beds and two shared baths. The trip is offered on weekends and you must reserve three days in advance. Equipment is not supplied. Bring a sleeping bag, rain gear, hiking boots and bug repellant. The women of Carboneras provide meals. This is a challenging trek and you should be in good physical condition. FUNDAECO, corner of 8a and 9a Calle Esquina (2nd floor), ☎ 502/7-948-7110, 502/7-440-4615, fax 502/7-440-4605, or call their Guatemala City office, 19 Av A089, Zona 15, Vista Hermosa II, ☎ 502/2-239-0298, 2-369-0231, www.fundaeco.org.gt.

Tortugal Marina in Fronteras can also get you to the reserve. ☎ 502/5-306-6432 or 7-742-8847, www.tortugal.com.

ADVENTURES ON WATER

PUNTA DE MANABIQUE RESERVE

Located at the southeastern tip of the Bahía de Amatiqué, Punta de Manabique peninsula was declared a protected zone on January 28, 1989. Fundación Mario Dary (FUNDARY), Diagonal 6, 17-19 Zona 10, Guatemala City, ☎ 502/7-333-4957, 7-366-7539, www.guate.net/fundary manabique, now manages the Punta de Manabique Reserve. As part of Guatemala's Caribbean coastline it covers 512 square miles (1,329 square km) of mangroves, beach and jungle. This is a marine park of great importance. The meeting of fresh water with saltwater has created bays, estuaries, marshes and lagoons that offer unique ecosystems filled with unusual flora and fauna. The international community is researching a number of rare sea grass found here. The reserve is home to the endangered manatee, tapir, jaguar howler monkey, wild boar, Piije duck and four species of marine turtle. Over 235 species of birds use this area for nesting. Running parallel to the shore is the **Great Maya Barrier Reef** – the second-longest reef in the region – with its breed of corals.

The area is threatened from deforestation and over-fishing. The introduction of rice fields is causing pollution of the waters and there is a thriving black market for turtle eggs and wild birds.

This is a vast area to explore. South of the Bahía de Amatiqué is **Bahía La Graciosa**, with a mangrove forest that serves as a breeding ground for manatees, herons and frigate birds. During stormy weather, this protected bay is used as a harbor for boats. At the northern tip is the village of **Cabo Tres Puntas** and the Julio Obiols Scientific Station. Farther down the peninsula on the ocean side the two small fishing communities of San Francisco del Mar and Punta Manabique sit close to **Playa de Manabique**. Sea turtles come to this long stretch of unsullied beach to lay their eggs. On clear days you can see the keys of Belize from here. The water is exceptionally clear and snorkeling and scuba diving are excellent since the waters are home to a variety of bizarre fish, like the strange-looking needlefish. Along the shore a virgin rainforest filled with eagles, tapirs and jaguars leads to **Laguna Escondida**, which is fed by Río Piteros. This area is a breeding ground for pelicans and a number of rare orchids and aquatic plant species grow here.

Large communities of howler monkeys make their home in the nearby dense jungle.

As you get closer south to the Honduran border you reach the **Bara de Jaloa**, the beginning of the English Channel. Here, the meeting of fresh water with saltwater has created a sandbar that's used by two species of nesting sea turtles. Dolphins can also be seen frolicking in the nearby waters.

The **English Channel** (Canal Ingles) is an artificial waterway built from 1900 to 1905 by the English. It extends from Bahía la Graciosa in Bahía de Amatiqué Bay through the Manabique peninsula to the Gulf of Honduras and was created to transport mahogany and other goods between Belize to Honduras. The channel is only 65 feet (20 meters) wide and was used only by small boats. When the British abandoned their logging enterprise, it was used by United Fruit Company to transport bananas. In 1944, a hurricane damaged the channel to the point where it was no longer usable and Mother Nature took over. It is now a beautiful causeway that winds through mangroves and jungles filled with wildlife. Butterflies, toucans, herons, monkeys and over 250 species of birds live along the canal and its waters are home to a number of sea animals, including the shy manatee.

The western side of the canal begins at the **Laguna Santa Isabel**. This large lagoon is surrounded by a combination of deciduous forest and mangroves. The water here is reddish due to the decomposing leaves and from tannin in the mangrove trees. Manatees and a number of fish favor this lagoon for its vegetation. Herons, ducks, martins, otters and giant iguanas live near its shore. Close by is a small community that supports itself by fishing.

El Estrecho is the widest part of the canal. It is filled with aquatic plants and is an important breeding ground for mollusks, crabs, frogs and other amphibians. The forests of **El Arbol Caído** and **Las Gambas** contain cahue, Santa María and zapote trees over 100 years old. Both forests have become refuges for the green iguana and howler monkeys. The canal travels for several miles until it reaches **Río Piteros**, a bird migration spot and breeding ground for crabs, mollusks and many varieties of amphibian. From there, the canal continues out to the Gulf of Honduras.

GETTING HERE: *Access to Punta de Manabique is via a boat shuttle that leaves from the municipal dock in Puerto Barrios. You should first speak with FUNDARY and book one of their excellent tours. A two-hour tour of the English Channel that include visits to the lagoons, birding and manatee spotting starts at Q150 per person. Reservations are a must for all tours.*

PUNTA DE MANABIQUE TOUR COMPANY

FUNDARY also offers a variety of overnight trips. Accommodations are at **El Saraguate Eco-hotel** near the community of Punta Manabique. This rustic lodge offers comfortably equipped shared rooms with mosquito nets and baths and an area for tents or hammocks. Fresh fish and seafood dinners are outstanding. The beach here is incredible and the lodge offers a variety of aquatic sports, including kayaking, trekking, snorkeling and scuba diving. The basic package includes only accommodations and meals starts at US $75 per person. For more information, contact Estuardo Herrera, Director, Reserva Punta de Manabique, 17 Calle entrada 5ta and 6ta Av, Puerto Barrios, Izabal, ☎ 502/7-948-0435 or 7-948-0944, www.guate.net/fundarymanabique.

WHERE TO STAY

HOTEL PRICE CHART

Prices are per person

$	under US $25
$$	US $26-50
$$$	US $51-85
$$$$	US $86-125
$$$$$	over US $125

There's no shortage of hotels in Puerto Barrios. If you decide to stay in a mid-range or budget hotel, make sure it doesn't rent rooms by the hour to *mujeres de la noche* (women of the night). Unfortunately, prostitution is still part of the economy here. Single men expect to be approached.

Amatiqué Bay Resort & Marina, *Finca Pichilingo, ☎ 502/7-948-1800, 948-1822, fax 502/7-948-3303, www.amatiquebay.net, 57 villas, $$$$*. This ultra-posh resort is set on the bay close to the port of Santo Tomás. It resembles a small city, with 57 fully equipped villas (including kitchens) scattered on manicured grounds. The two restaurants serve okay food. There are two adjoining pools with water slides, a lazy river and replica of a Spanish galleon and a watersports center offers kayaks, personal watercraft and sailboats. Eco-tours in the surrounding area, including diving trips to the keys of Belize, are available to guests. The full-service marina can accommodate 12- to 16-foot yachts.

Green Bay Hotel/Cayos del Diablo, *Km 8 Carreterra a Lívingston, Aldea Las Pavas, Santo Tomás de Castilla, ☎ 502/7-948-2361, fax 502/7-948-2364, www.caminoreal.com.gt, 50 rooms, $$$$*. When this hotel

was a Best Western property it was known as Cayos del Diablo, but since the Camino Real has taken over its management it's known as Green Bay. Name confusion aside, this is a lovely eco-hotel on Bahía de Amatiqué. Accommodations are in private thatched-roof bungalows, each luxuriously equipped and offering a view of the bay. The hotel has a nice lagoon-side pool and an excellent watersports center with canoes, windsurfers and wave runners. For an additional charge, you can join one of the hotel's trips to a variety of nearby attractions.

Hotel Mabrisa, *25 Calle and 20 Av, Colonia Virginia, ☎ 502/7-948-1450, fax 502/7-948-0940, 36 rooms, $$$.* This colonial-style hotel is situated in a very nice neighborhood against the backdrop of the Micos Mountains. It has exceptionally lush grounds, but rather generic and overpriced accommodations. Rooms have private balconies, two double beds and air conditioning. There's a game room, pool and a nice little restaurant. The staff is pleasant.

Hotel Puerto Libre, *Km 292 Ruta al Atlántico, ☎ 502/7-948-4739, fax 502/7-948-4749, www.hotelpuertolibre.com, 43 rooms, $$.* This hotel is on the outskirts of town, where the road divides to Puerto Barrios and Santo Tomás. It offers good value. Rooms are small, but pleasantly decorated with wooden furniture and look out onto the main garden. There is an average-sized pool and large restaurant. Weekend packages are offered.

Hotel Valle Tropical, *12 Calle between 5ta and 6ta Av, ☎ 502/7-948-7084, fax 502/7-948-1156, 35 rooms. $$.* A family-style hotel, Valle Tropical has large rooms furnished with two double beds that sport bright tropical-colored bed linens. There is plenty of hot water and excellent satellite television. The enormous dining room is popular for weddings. Other facilities include two large pools, a private beach, gymnasium and secure parking.

Hotel El Reformador, *16 Calle and 7a Av #159, ☎ 502/7-948-0384, 21 rooms, $-$$.* El Reformador is a pleasant hotel with spacious rooms that have private baths and cable TV. Rooms with air conditioning are more double the price, but not that much nicer. The restaurant is really good. Watch out for the dogs next door.

Hotel Del Norte, *7a Calle and 1a Av, ☎ 502/7-948-2116, fax 502/7-948-0087, 39 rooms, $-$$.* If you are looking for a hotel that oozes character, then book a room at this museum piece. It used to be the most luxurious hotel in Puerto Barrios and was frequented by banana moguls. Service in the dining room overlooking the bay is still white-glove – it's a shame the food doesn't live up to the same standard. Rooms are a tad dilapidated, but still comfortable. All have private baths, double beds and air conditioning. Ask for one with a sea view; interior rooms are not as pleasant. The seaside pools are usually packed with people.

Hotel Xelajú, *9a Calle between 6 a & 7a, ☎ 502/7-948-0482, 15 rooms, $.* If you can get past the grimy exterior, you will be delighted with this simple and spotless budget hotel close to the center of town, facing the market. Rooms are well equipped with working fans. If this location is full, try **Hotel Xelajú II**, *8a Av between 9a & 10a, ☎ 502/7-938-1117.*

Hotel Europa 1, *8a Av between Calle 8a and 9a, ☎ 502/7-948-0127, 10 rooms, $.* This budget hotel is close to the cathedral and all downtown services. Rooms are basic, clean and comfortable with private baths but no hot water. If they are full, check out the sister hotel, **Hotel Europa 2**, *3a Av, ☎ 502/7-948-1292,* which has similar, but newer, rooms. No credit cards.

Hotel Ensenada, *4a Av between Calles 10a and 11a, ☎ 502/7-948-0861, 15 rooms, $.* This clean and quiet hotel run by a local family offers tiny rooms on two levels that overlook a courtyard and parking lot. There's no hot water, but it does have satellite TV. A good deal. No credit cards.

WHERE TO EAT

Since Puerto Barrios is a place where people do business and sailors let loose, it has an interesting mix of restaurants.

Los Restaurante Delfines, *9a Calle Final Champas, ☎ 502/7-948-2301.* This restaurant is located right on the bay and has wonderful ocean views. You can sit outside on the patio or inside the glassed-in dining room. The specialty is seafood and fish and, when in season, the lobster is outstanding. The restaurant offers boat tours of the bay. Q50-90.

Rincón Uruguayo, *7 Av & 16C.* This is a meat-eaters paradise specializing in *parrilladas* (South American-style grilled food). Their steaks are divine, but they also offer terrific chicken and pork dishes. There are even some vegetarian side dishes that could serve as a meal. Q35-80.

Pizza Luigi, *5a Avenide and 13 Calle.* A great little pizza joint with a variety of tasty pizzas, lasagna and pastas. They will deliver to your hotel. Q35-60. No credit cards.

El Cafecito, *13 Calle between 6a and 7a Av, ☎ 502/7-948-9121.* If you are craving a great cup of coffee with something sweet, stop by El Cafecito. It has a variety of bagels, desserts and excellent cappuccino and espresso, all served in a cheery atmosphere. Q15-45. No credit cards.

Restaurante La Cabaña, *20 Calle and 13 Av, ☎ 502/7-948-6786.* This open-air eatery serves the best grilled fish in town and offers a terrific grilled meat platter that should satisfy even the hungriest carnivore. Very popular with the locals. Q25-60. No credit cards.

El Safari, *5a Av and 1a Calle, ☎ 502/7-948-0563.* The address is misleading; this palapa-style restaurant is located right on the beach and, when the tide comes in, the water is at its doorsteps. It has a great ambience and is popular with locals and tourists alike, who come to enjoy fresh fish, including ceviche and a variety of other seafood. There's live music in the evenings. Q45-80. No credit cards.

Restaurante Maxims, *6a Av and 8a Calle.* You can't miss this bright pink restaurant by the bus station. It serves great Chinese food in large portions; the egg rolls are really terrific. Q25-80.

Antonijitos Doña María, *6 Av and 13 Calle.* Enjoy *tortas*, *tamales*, *enchiladas* and a number of Guatemalan snacks at this popular and economical eatery. Q15-30. No credit cards.

Río Dulce

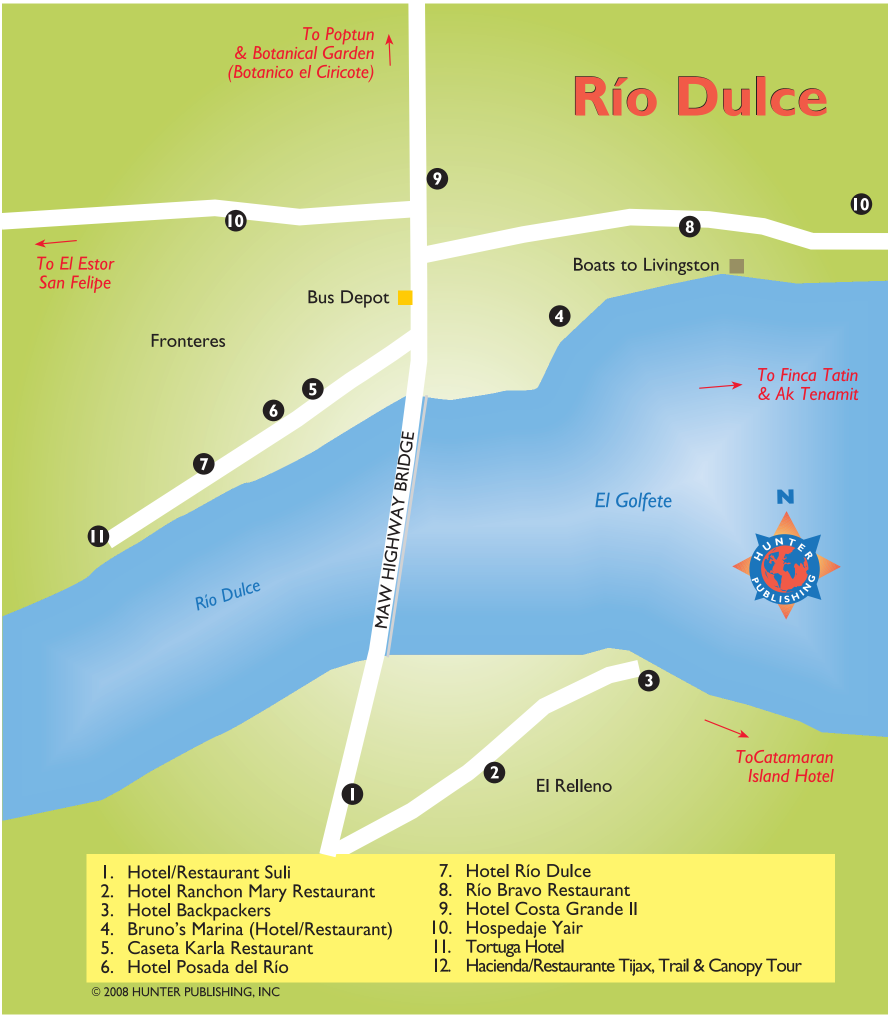
Río Dulce National Park is made up of the El Golfete region that extends to the Caribbean Sea and the area where Río Dulce meets Lake Izabal. The park also includes a half-mile (one km) strip on each side of the river where the twin cities of **Fronteras** and **El Relleno** are located. El Relleno is the smaller village on the south bank, while Fronteras, on the north bank, has more tourist services. The largest bridge in Central America connects the two cities.

The park has over 17,784 acres of wetland ecosystem where egrets, cranes, parrots, hummingbirds, birds, herons, orioles, and pelicans and five varieties of kingfishers come to nest. Smaller rivers, creeks and streams drain into the both the river and Lake Izabal and can be explored for miles in a dinghy or canoe through mangroves, hanging forests and grassy meadows. Sailing, kayaking, fishing and birding are favorite activities.

Unfortunately, the park is also battling an invasion by the aquatic plant *Hydra verticalla.* Although not native to the area, it is slowly overtaking the lake. Local conservationists have started a campaign to clean up the lake and visitors will be asked to participate by following guidelines set up to help eliminate this invasive plant.

RÍO DULCE, EL RELLENO, FRONTERAS

Poor Río Dulce. Not only does it share its name with the river and park, it manages to put its worst foot forward to newcomers. Its main street is actually a highway, CA-9, and it's a chaotic mess of shops, hotels and restaurants. It's often strewn with garbage and snarled with diesel trucks and buses. Aggressive and mildly menacing locals trying to sell boat trips swarm on you the minute you climb off the bus. Most people are so put off by the introduction that they allow themselves to be whisked off to Lívingston or catch the next bus out of town without stopping to explore the area. But once you get past the main drag, Río Dulce is quite lovely. There are some beautiful spots to be enjoyed and it makes excellent base for exploring the region and beyond.


Río Dulce
To Poptun
& Botanical Garden
(Botanico el Ciricote)
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San Felipe
Bus Depot
Boats to Livingston
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Río Dulce
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El Relleno
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1. Hotel/Restaurant Suli
2. Hotel Ranchon Mary Restaurant
3. Hotel Backpackers
4. Bruno's Marina (Hotel/Restaurant)
5. Caseta Karla Restaurant
6. Hotel Posada del Río
7. Hotel Río Dulce
8. Río Bravo Restaurant
9. Hotel Costa Grande II
10. Hospedaje Yair
11. Tortuga Hotel
12. Hacienda/Restaurante Tijax, Trail & Canopy Tour
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GETTING HERE & GETTING AROUND

Río Dulce is an aquatic community. The main highway, **Carreterra Atlántico** (CA-9) passes through El Relleno and Fronteras. A smaller road leads to the nearby village of San Felipe and forks off to El Estor, a fishing village on the northwestern shore of Lake Izabal. **Boats** are used for transportation around El Golfete and the lake. Most hotels have a dock and *lanchas* (speedboats) serve as the local taxis. They are plentiful and inexpensive; a typical ride will cost Q5-10 per person.

ADVENTURES ON WATER

Río Cienaga joins the Río Dulce a few miles north of town. It starts as a small lagoon and turns into a picturesque channel that travels north to pastures where cattle and horse graze. The waters of Río Cienaga are crystal clear and you can see six to eight feet (1.8-2.4 meters) to the bottom. The fishing along this river is excellent – snook (*robálo*), oscars (*mojarra*), river bass and catfish are plentiful.

FISHING GUIDES

Fishing trips can be arranged at the main dock or you can contact **Mar Marine**, Km 276 Carreterra al Atlantic, El Rellenos side, ☎ 502/7-930-5089, fax 502/7-930-5091.

ADVENTURES ON FOOT

Pineapple

Jardin Botanico el Ciricote, Ek Ciricote, Río Seja, Km 282, Ruta al Petén, ☎ 502/7-930-5231, www.ciricote.com. Don Emilio Medizábal has spent the better half of his adult life cataloguing the plants in the Río Dulce region. He considers this his life work and has opened his botanical garden to share what he has learned. Trails lead through the verdant jungle he has planted with thousands of plants species. There are several different kinds of ferns, orchids and tropical flowers, as well as a fruit orchard that includes lemons, avocados and pineapples. A visit to the gardens includes an educational walk with Don Emilio who will tell you about the various trees, such as the Santa María (prized for its wood) and the chicozapote tree (*Manilkara achras*), extracts from which are used in the making of chiclets gum.

> **NOTE:** Socks, shoes and long pants are a good idea for protection against bugs. Bring your bug repellent as well, since mosquitoes are plentiful.

Probably the most fascinating find on the property is the petrified wood – there are over a dozen samples, several of which have been carbon-dated back 22 million years. The tour is best in the morning when the birds and butterflies are most visible. The two-hour tour costs Q35.

> GETTING HERE: *The botanical garden is 10 minutes north of Fronteras in the little community of Río Seja. Hop on any colectivo going north and ask to be let off at Km 282, near the garden. The ride will cost Q3 and buses run every five minutes. If you have a large group, Don Emilio may come and pick you up. You can also ask for a guide or directions at the Hacienda Tijax Express office by the main dock in Fronteras. Ask to speak with Carlos.*

Rainbow over the Tijax sanctuary

Hacienda Tijax Jungle Trail and Canopy Tour, 400 meters across the bay from Fronteras, ☎ 502/7-930-5505 or 5506, fax 502/7-930-5507, www.tijax.com. Tijax has developed a nice sanctuary behind its hotel. Th reserve has 220 acres of fully reforested, productive forest, 40 acres of primary, old-growth (and very humid) tropical forest and 80 acres of land in various stages of planting. There's also a small rubber plantation. Almost two miles of trails start off at the marsh, traveling past meadows and

Trail in the sanctuary

down into the valley and forest. Turtles and kingfishers are a common sight and you might see the occasional iguana. A section of the route now has a canopy trail through the trees where you can spot birds, orchids and other vines. Rosewood, chicozapote, chichipate and naranjo are just some of the trees in the forest. A small freshwater pool offers a cool respite. No entrance fee to the canopy or rubber plantation.

Leaves of the rubber tree

***Hevea brasiliensis** is a rubber tree native to Central and South America. Most of our rubber comes from petroleum, but 25% still comes from these trees. The production of rubber in Guatemala began as early as 1736, when sheets of dried sap were sent to France. In 1791, when Samuel Peal discovered how to waterproof material by dipping it into a solution of rubber in turpentine, the industry began. In 1839, Charles Goodyear discovered the process of vulcanization, making the materials waterproof and heat resistant. Although it is not a large producer of rubber, Guatemala has the perfect weather for it, especially in the Río Dulce region which has heavy rainfalls and hot temperatures.*

EL GOLFETE

El Golfete is a widening of the Río Dulce that forms a small bay 10 miles (16 km) wide and between six and 12 feet (9.6-19 meters) deep. The bay is dotted with small islands, most of them inhabited only by birds. Small bays, lagoons and rivers are found along the shore, which is where the majority of hotels are located. Farther east, as El Golfete starts to meet the Caribbean Sea, are several remote Indian villages, including the Garífuna village of Lívingston.

ADVENTURES IN NATURE

CAYO GRANDE

Cayo Grande (Large Island), at the east end of El Golfete, is uninhabited and humans are only allowed a short distance on shore. Visitors are not permitted to go inland. A variety of birds, including the colorful toucan, come here to nest. The best times to spot birds are at dawn and dusk; during the day the birds fly to other locations in search of food. You must approach the island by boat, travel through the mangroves to shore and walk a short distance in order to spot the wildlife. Boat tours of the Río Dulce or those going to Lívingston usually make a passing stop here. Prices for tours start at Q75. You can ask any boatman at the main dock for a tour. Bring your repellent because the mosquitoes are plentiful and hungry.

ADVENTURES ON WATER

EL BIOTÓPO DE CHOCÓN MACHACAS (MANATEE NATIONAL PARK)

In 1976, Thor Janson conducted a manatee field study in the Río Dulce area and discovered it had the ideal conditions for this sea mammal. He also found that the sea cow was quickly being hunted to extinction. He presented his study to the Guatemalan government who responded by creating this 292-square-mile (7,600-hectare) reserve at the mouth of Río Chocón Machacas. A series of waterways accessible by boat winds through small lagoons and mangroves (the manatee's natural habitat). On land, a nature trail beginning at the visitor's center goes through forests where jaguars and tapirs live. Plants include a lovely combination of mahogany, palm trees and tropical flowers. Camping is permitted, but there are no services so you must bring your own equipment. Boat tours to the reserve can be arranged in Río Dulce and usually cost about US $10, depending on the number of people in your group.

THE SHY MANATEE

Don't be disappointed if you don't spot any manatees. They are notoriously shy, and many locals believe they have left the area entirely. Manatees, also known as sea cows, are mammals that spend their entire life in water. They are a close relative of the elephant and can grow up to 2,000 pounds (907 kilograms). Originally unafraid of man and quite friendly, manatees are now shy and elusive. Can anyone blame them? They were once found in large groups throughout the Caribbean, but are now on the endangered species list after being hunted almost to extinction. Spotting a manatee takes a great deal of time and patience. The slightest noise can frighten them away. You must be willing to sit quietly for several hours in a dinghy or canoe in order to see one.

HOT SULFUR SPRINGS

A few miles up the river, half-way between Río Dulce and Lívingston, is a volcanically heated spring that empties into the bay. You can see steam as the sulfurous hot waters meet the cool waters of the Río Dulce. There is a docking area where you can have a picnic and then relax in the hot and cold waters. Locals believe the water has curative powers. Boat tours of the Río Dulce or to Lívingston usually make a passing stop here. Prices for tours start at Q75 per person. If you want to stop and take a swim, let your boatman know ahead of time.

RÍO DULCE CANYON

At the point where El Golfete meets the Caribbean, the river narrows into a canyon of sheer limestone cliffs that tower 300-400 feet (90-120 meters) above the river. A living wall of long vines hang down from trees to meet the water and flocks of white heron roosting in the trees show as flecks of white in this canyon of green. The view is quite stunning. Since all boats pass through the canyon coming or going from Lívingston, no special tour is required. The boat to Lívingston, one-way, is Q75.

CULTURAL ADVENTURES

ASOCIACIÓN AK'TENAMIT

Founded in 1992, **Asociacion Ak'Tenamit**, Barra de Lámpara, Lívingston, ☎ 502/7-908-3392, office location, 11 Av A 9-39, Zona 2, Guatemala City, ☎ 502/5-254-1560, www.aktenamit.org, is a non-profit organization working with the local Q'eqchí Maya communities providing education, healthcare and community development. They are using an innovative system where locals earn credits for their agricultural goods or manual labor. The credits can then be exchanged for schooling or health services. Using this method, the program has built a tourist facility, schools, clinics and a successful cottage industry that produces handmade paper products now sold throughout the area. Ak'Tenamit and two local Q'eqchí villages also run eco-tours in the area.

Río Tatín

Río Tatín Ecotourism Center. This center in El Golfete is 20 minutes by boat from Lívingston and 35 minutes from Río Dulce. It sits beside a beautiful river with crystal-clear waters and is surrounded by lush tropical jungle. There's a small handicrafts shop and working area where women from nearby villages create their paper products and animal masks. Books, postcards, lamps, writing paper and masks are just a few of the beautiful items for sale. A 40-seat restaurant serves typical Maya and Garífuna meals, such as *pachai* fish (flavored with jungle leaves) or brochette of shrimp and vegetables. Prices are reasonable, about Q50 per person.

There are two trails to walk. One runs parallel to Río Tatín until it reaches a small waterfall where you can swim. Along the way, sit at one of the rest stops and try to spot some of the birds and animals around you. Plants and flowers have been labeled with small plaques. This self-guided tour takes about 20 minutes. A second path leads to Ak’Tenamit secondary school, where students from remote villages are offered the chance of education. The trails make for a pleasant afternoon outing.

Asociación Ak’Tenamit has been working with Maya Q’eqchí communities since 1992 developing alternative income for the locals. **Plan Grande Quehueche** started in February 2002 and offers several excellent jungle treks from three different locations: Lívingston, Siete Altares or Ak’ Tenamit. Accommodations for the two-day/one-night jungle treks are in a small jungle resort.

© Finca Tatín

Day One: Hike to the Lodge. The shortest jungle trek starts in Siete Altares, just outside of Lívingston, and takes between 40 minutes and 1½ hours, depending on your fitness level. It’s an easy, safe trail. You will have to rent a boat to take you to Siete Altares or use one of the *colectivo* boats. The second trail leaves from Lívingston and is another safe jungle trek that takes anywhere from two to three hours to complete. The third and most beautiful trail leaves from the Ak’Tenamit site. It passes virgin rainforest. Your guide will lead you to the Cave of the Tiger (*Cueva del Tigre*), the biggest cave in the area. It has a waterfall in front of its entrance and you must pass underneath or around that to get into the cave. The name refers to a giant jaguar that apparently lived in the cave for a number of years. There have been no recent sightings, but many locals are still reluctant to visit the cave. This trek takes about 1½ hours to complete. Local Q’eqchí guides will point out flora and fauna on the way.

Accommodations are in the village in a four-room guesthouse built in the local tradition. Rooms are shared – two beds to a room – and have crisp linens and screened windows. Bathrooms are also shared and use a special latrine system to avoid pollution. Since the village does not have electricity, everything is solar-powered. The kerosene lamps used at night add a romantic atmosphere. Beside the guesthouse is a small stream that’s visited by animals at night – you may even spot a jaguar. Prices include all meals provided by the local women.

Day Two: Cultural Exposure. This is a day of cultural exposure. You can go caving and trekking deeper into the jungle, learn how to weave, make paper or carve. You’re also invited to participate in the daily Maya ceremonies of music, dance, song and stories around a campfire. This is one of the most authentic tours offered and is an excellent opportunity to meet Maya-Q’eqchí. All proceeds go to the community to help preserve their culture and way of life.

The tour is restricted to eight people at a time and no more than 30 per month. Prices are Q300 per person for all activities and Q225 for just the tour and overnight stay.

GETTING HERE: *Ak'Tenamit is 20 minutes by boat from Lívingston and 35 minutes from Río Dulce. You can use one of the private motorboats that charge Q75 per person or jump on a colectivo boat that leaves as soon as it is full for Q30. Just be sure to let them know that you want to get off at Ak'Tenamit. If you are coming from Puerto Barrios, you will also have to pick up the boat in Lívingston. You don't need reservations to visit the center but you do need them for the overnight tours.*

VOLUNTEER PROGRAMS

Ak'Tenamit has a highly respected volunteer program. Participants live with a Q'eqchí Maya family and help with various projects. Ak'Tenamit also has an adoption program.

SPANISH SCHOOL

Colorful hammocks

Finca Tatín, banks of Río Tatín, ☎ 502/7-902-0831, www.fincatatin.centroamerica.com. Claudia and Carlos Simónini run this enchanting bed and breakfast Spanish school tucked away in the jungle. The property is surrounded by giant trees filled with exotic tropical birds. The Spanish lessons offered are high quality and tailored to your needs. Accommodation is either in a dormitory or bungalow with private baths. Bird watching, swimming and relaxing in a hammock are the favored activities, but there are also some wonderful nature trails close by that follow the river and its tributaries. One trail runs parallel to the Tatín River and arrives at a small waterfall where you can swim. Rest stops along the way give you the opportunity to take a break while trying to spot birds and animals. The plants and flowers along the trail have been labeled with small plaques. This tour is self-guided and takes about 20 minutes. A second path leads to Ak'Tenamit secondary school.

Books, postcards, lamps, writing paper and masks are just a few of the beautiful items for sale at Finca Tatín. The small restaurant offers typical Maya and Garifuna meals such as *pachai* fish (flavored with jungle leaves) or brochette of shrimp and vegetables. Prices are reasonable at Q50 per person. *Cayucos* (native canoes) rent for only US $2.50 per day. Tours to other attractions, including the local Q'eqchi villages, can be arranged. The finca is most easily reached from Lívingston or by catching a boat in Río Dulce. 5 bungalows, 6 rooms, $. Spanish lessons: $5 per hour, $120 per week.

WHERE TO STAY IN RÍO DULCE

All the hotels in Río Dulce are either along the main strip under the bridge or on El Golfete bay. Hotels on the river usually offer boat pick up at the main dock in Fronteras. The more economical hotels are found on the mainland.

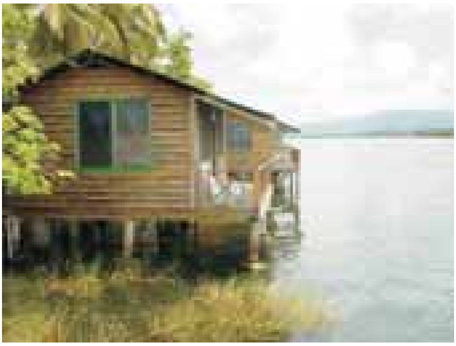
HOTEL PRICE CHART

Prices are per person

$	under US $25
$$	US $26-50
$$$	US $51-85
$$$$	US $86-125
$$$$$	over US $125

TIP: Prices increase the farther upriver you travel. Competition is fierce, and some people will tell you your hotel has closed in order to get you to their hotel. Call your hotel of choice to check.

Catamaran Island Hotel, *a half-mile downriver, ☎ 502/7-930-5494 , fax 502/7-930-5492, Guatemala City 502/2-367-1545, fax 502/2-367-1633, www.catamaranisland.com, 32 bungalows, $$$.* This is one of the oldest hotels on the Río Dulce, originally built to handle tourists from Belize. It has an old-style Caribbean feel to it. Private bungalows are offered with private baths and balconies that have a lake view. A pathway leads to the tropical gardens where there is a restaurant and a hideaway bar built over the river. You can amuse yourself in the swimming pool or on the tennis court, but the main lobby has the only TV on site. Tours to local attractions, birding and fishing are offered for an additional charge.



Bruno's Marina, *foot of Río Dulce bridge, Fronteras side, ☎ 502/7-930-5721, www.mayaparadise.com, 11 rooms, $-$$.* Bruno's is popular with the party yacht crowd. It has a swimming pool overlooking the river and a nice restaurant (unfortunately, the food is bland). The building is a bit dilapidated. Still, second-floor rooms come with a great terrace overlooking the bay. They are furnished with single or double beds, a miniature TV, air conditioning and private baths. A smaller building has basic rooms in a bungalow with shared baths and there are also 10 dorm beds available – take these as a last resort.

© Bruno's Marina

Hacienda Tijax, *a quarter-mile (400 meters) across the bay from Fronteras, ☎ 502/7-930-5505 or 5506, fax 502/7-930-5507, www.tijax.com, 5 rooms, 16 cabins, 4 bungalows, $-$$$.* Every town has a place with a bit of magic that grabs you and makes you stay longer than intended. Hacienda Tijax is that place in Río Dulce. This working farm is owned by Eugenio Gobbato, a passionate conservationist who rescued the land from slash-and-burn farming and turned it into a nature reserve with a nature trail and a rubber and teak plantation (see *Adventures on Foot*, page 376, for more details). Take your pick from private bungalows, cabins for three, single rooms and a camping area. The architecture is Thai style and rooms are simple and elegant. Walkways over the water lead to the restaurant and pool. In front is the marina. The restaurant here serves the best food in town. The lodge's Tijax Express will pick you up from the main dock free of charge. Prices include taxes, pick-up and drop-off from town and morning coffee.

Hotel Costa Grande II, *Fronteras Village, ☎ 502/7-930-5163, 10 rooms, 4 bungalows. $.* This is a decent hotel in the heart of the village. It doesn't have much in the way of ambience, but it is, for the most part, clean. Cheaper rooms have a two single beds, private bath and fan. The private bungalows are equipped with air conditioning, TV, private bath with hot water and small sitting area.

Hotel Suli, *El Relleno village, just by the bridge, ☎ 502/7-930-5096, 11 rooms, $.* This pleasant little hotel is often overlooked because it's on the south side of the river where there are fewer services. Although it doesn't have much of a view, it's a pleasant place to stay. Large rooms are comfortably furnished with double beds, private baths, air conditioning and cable TV. Secure parking is available, and a restaurant serves excellent seafood.

Hotel Río Dulce, *at the foot of the bridge in Fronteras, ☎ 502/7-930-5179 or 5180, 16 rooms, $.* This is probably the best budget hotel in the area. It's extremely neat and clean and the cozy rooms have large double beds, TV, fan and private bath. You can even get air conditioning for an additional fee. There is not much of a view and, since it's close to the bridge, it can get noisy. Ask for a room at the back. No credit cards.

Hotel Posada del Río, *near post office in Fronteras, no phone, 9 rooms, $.* This cheery hotel underneath the bridge has a partial view of the river. Rooms are basic, but clean and comfortable, with queen-size beds, private baths and air conditioning. There is excellent security here and the family that runs the hotel is very kind. No credit cards.

Hospedaje Yair, *Fronteras village, road to San Felipe, ☎ 502/7-930-5131, 11 rooms, $.* A simple hotel with tidy basic rooms but little ambience. Row accommodations open up onto a cement courtyard. All have a double bed, private bath (sometimes with hot water), air conditioning and cable TV. No credit cards.

Hotel Backpackers, *El Relleno, foot of Río Dulce bridge (south side), ☎ 502/7-930-5168, 2 dormitories with 40 beds in each, $.* Well – it's the cheapest place in town, which means it's very popular with backpackers who seem able to endure the impoverished foam beds in a large dormitory room with no privacy and brisk cold showers. The riverfront location is ideal, though, and the property even boasts a lakeside restaurant, a bar and Internet service. The staff isn't happy or helpful. No credit cards.

While staying at Hotel Backpackers, you may hear about Casa Guatemala Orphanage, which the hotel supports. There are rumors about whether the money actually makes it to the children, many of whom appear to be working here. The director has also started a rather controversial program where people pay to volunteer at Casa Guatemala. There have been reports of the volunteers being badly treated.

Tortugal, *5 miles upriver from the Fronteras municipal dock, ☎ 502/5-306-6432 or 502/7-742-8847, www.tortugal.com.* This marina, located on a small island, has started renting romantic thatch-roofed guest homes made with wood and rock, equipped with large beds and ceiling fans. This is a little oasis and the perfect spot to relax. Some of the houses even have kitchens. But there is also a terrific restaurant that serves homemade meals. The apple pie is worth the visit alone. The hotel will pick you up at either dock in town and can assist with arrangements to visit Cerro San Gil natural reserve.

WHERE TO EAT IN RÍO DULCE

There are plenty of *comedores* in Río Dulce. Some serve simple, hearty meals, while others offer greasy fast food – enjoyable for the first few minutes before heartburn starts.

Río Bravo, *Turicentro Las Brisas, ☎ 502/7-930-5167, fax 502/7-930-5044.* This dockside restaurant is the best on the mainland, serving terrific pizza and excellent ceviche. Also on the menu are delicious soups, sandwiches, pastas and fresh fish. Drinks are cheap and plentiful, and breakfast is a real bargain. Lots of people end up here because of its convenient location by the dock, where boats to Lívingston and other locations arrive and depart. Q14-45.

Hacienda Tijax, *across the bay from Fronteras, ☎ 502/7-930-5505, 5506, fax 502/7-930-5507, www.tijax.com.* A great restaurant on the river serving delicious salads, sandwiches, pastas, chicken, steak and seafood. Vegetarians will be especially grateful for the tasty salads and wonderful fruit drinks. Everything is fresh and healthy – a nice change from the usual greasy fare. You also couldn't ask for a better locale either – you can dine overlooking the river and bridge. The staff is as charming as the surroundings. The Tijax Express will ferry you over for free. Q34-70.

Catamaran Island Hotel, *a half-mile downriver, in Río Dulce ☎ 502/7-930-5494, fax 502/7-920-5492, Guatemala City fax 502/2-367-1545, www.mayaparadise.com.* If you feel the need to wear that special cocktail dress you brought along, then this is the restaurant to visit. It's got a posh bar where the dress will fit in. The food is decent. Notable dishes include fresh fish, steak and Caesar salad. The biggest selling point at the Catamaran is the romantic river setting. Q70-120.

Caseta Karla, *Fronteras, by the bridge, down from Posada del Río.* This little hole-in-the-wall *comedore* serves excellent grilled fish and grilled chicken. Tacos and coleslaw are the usual side dishes. It fills up fast because it's popular with the locals.

Bruno's Marina, *foot of Río Dulce bridge, Fronteras side, ☎ 502/7-930-5721, www.mayaparadise.com.* Come here for standard American fast food. Hamburgers and coffee are the best thing on the menu – avoid the salads. There's a well-stocked bar and a good sound system; folks tend to come here to hang out with other gringo party animals. Q25-65.

Hotel Ranchon Mary, *El Relleno, foot of the bridge, no phone.* This open-air restaurant is popular with locals and the yacht crowd. It's nicely furnished all in wood (including the sinks) and serves food that, while not inspired, is consistently good. The hamburgers, club sandwiches and chicken are the best choices. The lakeside location is hard to beat. Perhaps this is reflected in the prices, which are a bit steep. Q40-75.

Hotel y Restaurant Suli, *El Relleno village, half-mile from bridge, ☎ 502/7-930-5096.* It may lack a view of the river, but this restaurant offers excellent fish dinners for a reasonable price. You should try their other fresh seafood dishes, all of which are good. Q25-50.

SAN FELIPE

SIGHTSEEING

San Felipe Village is a small community two miles west of Río Dulce. It has a number of pleasant family hotels and, if you are looking for a quiet base, this is the perfect spot. The community doesn't get nearly the same amount of traffic as Río Dulce – most people just come to see the castle.

> GETTING HERE: *A lovely walkway leads from Río Dulce to San Felipe. It takes about 45 minutes to reach the village. Alternately, catch one of the local* colectivos *leaving every half-hour from Río Dulce. Tickets are Q5.*

El Castillo (The Castle), a Spanish fort, is about 1½ miles (2.4 km) from the main bridge on a rocky point where the Río Dulce narrows before emptying into Lake Izabal. The towers and cannons against the background of palm trees and a tropical river should not be missed.

HISTORY OF EL CASTILLO

Early in the 16th century when trade was set up between Spain and Guatemala, this area was known as **Golfo Dulce**. Marauding pirates sailed in from the Gulf of Mexico and Gulf of Honduras to plunder the warehouses. In 1595, the governor petitioned King Philip II of Spain for a tower equipped with 12 cannons and 12 soldiers to defend the trade route. Torre de Sande was completed a few years later, but it was destroyed by pirates in 1604. Pedro de Bustamante rebuilt the tower and it was named Torre de Bustamante in his honor. For the next 36 years pirates plundered the fort, damaging a different part each time. But the structure was too important to abandon so, in 1651, Judge Lara y Mogrovejo fixed it up and it became known as San Felipe de Lara Castle. During a 1655 lull in piracy the fort was turned into a prison, but by 1660 it was back in commission. A pirate community on Isla Tortuga became headquarters for Los Hermanos de la Costa (Brothers of the Coast), an international pirate community. For the next six years they pillaged the nearby Río Dulce area, usually stopping off to throw some cannon balls at the fort. By 1672 the fort was so badly damaged that General Francisco de Escobedo was ordered to restore it. He enclosed the entry and expanded the fort, but it did little good. During a 1679 raid on the settlement of Bodegas (now known as Mariscos), the fort was cleaned out.

After this spectacular failure the Spanish government commissioned Sergeant Major Diego Gomez de Ocampo to make the fort work. In 1684, he had just started renovations when the Dutch pirate Jan Zaques attacked the fort, stealing all its ammunition before setting it on fire. From 1684-88 the fort was rebuilt with more ramparts and room for 100 guards. This time, the Spanish finally got it right and for the next 58 years it successfully defended the Río Dulce. Sporadic attacks by English and Irish pirates took place on and off from 1737 to 1779, but there were no significant battles. The last attack on the fort was by a Colombian pirate in 1822. Commerce by then had shifted up the coast and the fort fell into disuse.

The fort remained abandoned until 1955 when the Guatemalan government hired architect Francisco Ferrús Roig to restore it. During an investigation of the General Archives of the Indies in Madrid Spain, he discovered some old fort plans that he was able to use to incorporate the different eras of restorations. The restoration team also uncovered historical artifacts, including the original cannons buried upriver. Visitors can see the original Torre de Bustamante tower alongside the 18th-century improvements.

Today, El Castillo is a tranquil spot. It's a major tourist attraction and offers tours in four different languages. The grounds have been turned into a lovely park with a visitor center, restaurant, pool and picnic area. A nearby dock takes boats arriving from Río Dulce. Open 8am to 5 pm daily. Q10.

GETTING HERE: *If you are staying in San Felipe village, El Castillo is within walking distance. If you are staying in Río Dulce, you can reach El Castillo by colectivo. They leave every half-hour and cost Q4. You can also hire a boat from Río Dulce to El Castillo for Q70 or take a tour of the lake for Q100 per person, which includes a visit to the castle, along with the entrance fee.*

WHERE TO STAY & EAT

All hotels are on the same route, Camino a Castilo de San Felipe de Lara – the only road in town. There aren't any restaurants except those found in the hotels.

Banana Palms, ☎ *502/7-930-5033 or 930-3941. $$$$$.* This is an exclusive resort located on the Río Dulce with luxury villas and sculptured grounds. Villas have private decks with river views, Jacuzzi, satellite TV, air conditioning, mini-bars and lavish bathrooms. The grounds have a pool, restaurant, game room and gardens. There is also a private dock with a yacht offering tours. 33 villas.

Hotel Viñas del Lago, ☎ *502/7-930-5053 or 5054, fax 502/7-930-5055, www.vinasdellargo.com, 15 rooms, $$-$$$.* Is it the turquoise-colored rooms, the peach-bamboo décor in the dining room or the kidney-shaped swimming pool that makes you feel like you have stepped back to the 1950s? The grounds are quite lush with a small zoo and private dock.

Hotel Changri-La. ☎ *502/7-930-5467, fax 502/7-930-5468, 6 rooms, 2 bungalows, $$.* This is a modern hotel with pool and restaurant. Rooms are rather small but pleasantly decorated with lots of homey touches. All have air conditioning, cable TV and modern bathrooms with great water pressure and hot water.

Hotel Don Humberto, *beside the castle,* ☎ *502/7-930-5051, 8 rooms, $.* This is a cheery budget hotel within walking distance of El Castillo. The rooms are basic with a double bed, overhead fan and private bath with no hot water. No credit cards.

Hospedaje La Cabaña del Viajero. ☎ *502/7-930-5062, fax 502/7-930-5062, 8 rooms, $.* A very amiable family runs this small hotel that resembles a bed and breakfast. Rooms in the main building have bamboo windows decorated with lace curtains and furnished with two single beds, fans and private bath. Small bungalows are similar but have small patios and hammocks. There is a minuscule pool with a pleasant palapa café. No credit cards.

LÍVINGSTON

Lívingston is a funky village on the Caribbean coast. It is like no other community in Guatemala, with a very Belizean feel, due to its close proximity to that country and the local Garífuna culture.

HISTORY

The Garífuna have an unusual history. In 1655, two British slave ships carrying Africans from Nigeria sank off the shores of **St Vincent Island**. The slaves swam to freedom and settled alongside the **Arawak Indians** who were living on the island. The two tribes intermarried and their children became known as the **Garífuna**, or Black Caribes. By 1750, the Garífuna were numerous, prosperous and, for the most part, got along well the **French** colonists who had also settled on the island. In 1763, the **British**, who owned St. Vincent, decided to take back the most prosperous Garífuna farms. This led to the 32-year war. The

French left in 1775, but the Garífuna lasted until 1796 when they were deported to the island of Roatan in the Gulf of Honduras. Roatan was owned by the Spanish, who would not allow all the Garífuna to remain. On April 12, 1979, they transported 5,000 men, women and children to the coastal town of Trujillo. From there, the Garífuna spread to Belize and Guatemala, bringing their own language, music, dance and religion.

Colorful painted boat

Garífuna language and culture is a blend of African, Spanish, South American Indian, French and English. As a people, they are most famous for their drums, solid pieces of wood, hollowed out, carved with intricate patterns and covered with the skins of peccary or goats. The drummers use a lead-follow pattern, with one drummer beating a steady pattern while the other plays more intricate rhythms. The accompanying dances and songs are infectious. Their most famous dance is the *Punta*, where couples try to outdo each other in style and movement.

The Garífuna culture is one of the biggest attractions and Lívingston is experiencing some severe problems at the moment. It has become famous not only for its Garífuna culture, but also as a party town where you can get stoned or laid – not necessarily in that order. The influx of tourists has upset the balance in town and many jaded locals have started overcharging for services. Most disturbing are the violent crimes against tourists, which include rape and armed robbery. This is not the place to let your guard down, and you should save the heavy partying for home.

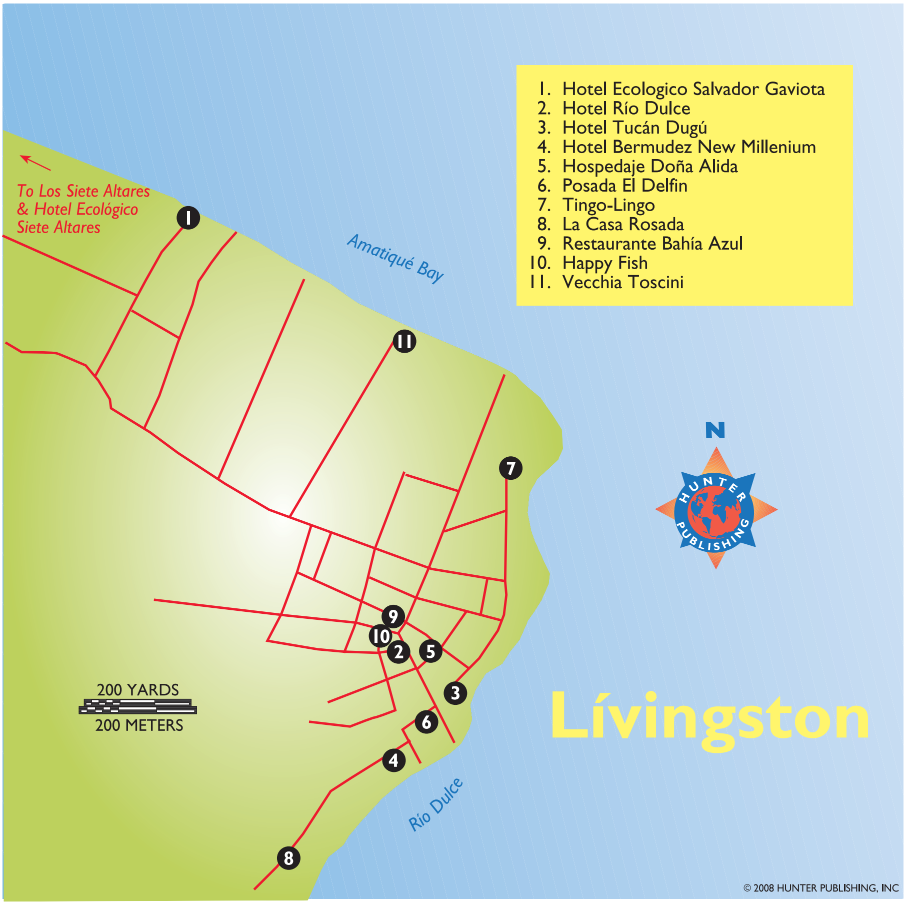
GETTING HERE

You can reach Lívingston from either Puerto Barrios or Río Dulce. To avoid a rushed visit, plan to stay overnight. The last boats from Lívingston to the mainland leave at 2 pm.

The cheapest way and quickest way to reach Lívingston is via Puerto Barrios. All boats leave from the municipal dock at the end of Calle 12. A public ferry leaves Puerto Barrios at 10 am and 5 pm. The trip takes 1½ hours and costs Q10. *Colectivo lanchas* (public speedboats) leave whenever the boat is full with between 12 and 15 passengers (they usually fill up quickly in the morning, but may take longer in the afternoon). The ride takes 40 minutes (longer if the weather is bad) and costs Q25. Some of the boatmen will try to overcharge. Stand your ground. If you are in a hurry or traveling with four or more people, consider hiring a private *lancha* for Q150.

Getting to Lívingston from Río Dulce is even simpler. Plenty of boats follow this route. In fact, you will get sick of being offered boat rides to Lívingston every time you walk the main street, and the bellicose boatmen are particularly overwhelming when you first get off a bus.

> **TIP:** Don't buy your ticket right away. A favorite trick (aside from overcharging) is to sell you a ticket and tell you the boat is leaving immediately. You trundle off to the dock only to discover you have a two-hour wait. Scheduled departure times for boats to Lívingston are 9 am, 1 pm and 2 pm. All other times are unscheduled, which means the boats leave only when they are have 10 passengers. Some boat operators load up at the main dock and then drive around the river picking up passengers from various hotels. This can easily add several hours to an already long trip.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1. Hotel Ecologico Salvador Gaviota
2. Hotel Río Dulce
3. Hotel Tucán Dugú
4. Hotel Bermudez New Millenium
5. Hospedaje Doña Alida
6. Posada El Delfin
7. Tingo-Lingo
8. La Casa Rosada
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11. Vecchia Toscini

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If you would like to stop and visit any of the El Golfete sites along the way, ask the boatmen about it *after you have paid for your ticket*. If you ask about a tour before agreeing on a price, they will add a fee without you realizing. You shouldn't pay extra for a stop at Sulfur Springs, Caye Grande or Cañón de Río Dulce, since these are on the way to Lívingston. Without any stops, the ride takes about two hours. With stops it can be anywhere from four to six hours. All tickets are Q75 and there is no room for bargaining. The return boat from Lívingston to Río Dulce is at 2 pm. A favorite route with visitors is to take the trip down Río Dulce and return via Puerto Barrios.

Navigating your way around Lívingston is really simple. There is one main dock at the foot of the hill. The street that starts there is the main street.

ADVENTURES ON FOOT

LAS SIETE ALTARES

Las Siete Altares (The Seven Altars) is a series of seven waterfalls three miles (five km) northwest of Lívingston. During the rainy season, each waterfall forms a small pool at its base – perfect for swimming (there are no falls in dry season). The falls get progressively more spectacular the higher you go, so that by the time you are at the seventh altar there is a giant pool. It's a slippery climb to the top and most people make it only as far as the third or fourth altar. Be careful if you plan to climb to the top – the rocks hidden by the water are treacherous. The lower cascades are easier.

INSIDER TIP: RED ALERT

The fine art of hustling has been perfected in Lívingston, so beware the over-friendly local who offers to be your friend or has this wonderful proposition just for you. There have been quite a few armed robberies and rapes along the beach path to Siete Altares. Don't take this route alone or in small groups. Check with other tourists to see if there have been any robberies. If there have, avoid the area completely. Leave all money and valuables at your hotel, including your camera. Hire a boat to take you to the falls instead of walking. Restaurante Bahía Azul and Casa Rosada Hotel can refer you to a trustworthy guide. Prices start at Q50.

ADVENTURES ON WATER

RÍO SARSTÚN RESERVE

Río Sarstún forms a natural boundary between Belize and Guatemala. It is an area of great bio-diversity, home to the endangered manatee, Colmenero bear, Morelet's crocodile and sea turtles. It is filled with tropical forests, mangroves, estuaries and lagoons. Thanks to persistent lobbying by CONAP (National Council for Protected Areas) and FUNDAECO (Foundation for Sustainable Tourism and Conservation), 5,556 acres at the mouth of the river has been declared a national reserve. This area is bordered to the north by the Sierra Santa Cruz-Chocón Reserve and to the east by the Bahía de Amatiqué. Eventually, it will link up with Sarstún-Temash National Park in Belize and stretch down to Río Dulce National Park, making it one of the largest protected reserves in the area. FUNDAECO is now working on developing a local office in Lívingston that will offer eco-tours into the reserve and train local fishermen to act as guides. Until then, you can visit in a private boat that can take you as far as the Belizean border. You will see wildlife and pass a number of small communities along the way. Private tours start at Q100 per person, depending on the length of the tour and the number of people. Also, *lanchas* leave Lívingston when full and stop at small communities along the way. It takes 30 minutes to reach the river and tickets are Q20.

PLAYA BLANCA

Just north of Lívingston, between Punta Cocli and Río Sarstún, is a lovely stretch of white sand with crystal-clear waters. Playa Blanca is the perfect place for sunbathing and swimming. It makes up for the disappointing beaches near Lívingston. There is even a small freshwater river nearby. The adjacent Hotel Túcan Dugú, which owns the beach, charges an entrance fee and offers security. The best deal is to take a tour with Restaurante Bahía Azul or La Casa Rosada Hotel, ☎ 502/7-947-0303, for Q90. It includes a visit to Las Siete Altares, Río Cocolí and Playa Dorada and comes with a packed lunch.

CAYOS SAPODILLAS, BELIZE

The Belize cayes are part of the Great Maya Reef, the second-largest barrier reef in the world (Australia's Great Barrier Reef wins). The Maya

Reef starts at the tip of the Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico and extends down into Honduras. Hundreds of small islets known as cayes run parallel to the Belize coast and offer relatively shallow and clear waters. The snorkeling here is incredible and you are often able to see the psychedelic marine life the reef has spawned. A number of tours are offered in town – someone will approach you to sell you a trip. The going rate is Q250 for a day-trip. You have to add on a US $7.50 conservation and a US $20 exit fee paid to the Belizean government. Ouch!

WHERE TO STAY

Hordes of young boys will be waiting to show you the way to a hotel the moment you arrive in Lívingston. They will eagerly carry your bags and recommend the best hotel in town. Of course, they receive a kick-back from the hotels, so don't feel obligated to follow them. If you do go with one, give a tip of Q4 or so. These boys can be pests but, for the most part, they are harmless.

HOTEL PRICE CHART

Prices are per person

$	under US $25
$$	US $26-50
$$$	US $51-85
$$$$	US $86-125
$$$$$	over US $125

Hotel Túcan Dugú, *Barrio el Centro (Center neighborhood), ☎ 502/7-947-0072, www.villasguatemala.com, 45 rooms, $$$$.* This elegant hotel sits atop a hill up from the main dock. It has tropical gardens, a swimming pool and a bar and could easily be the setting for a novel. Rooms are located in a long, low Caribbean-style ranch house with a thatched roof. They are filled with mahogany furniture, bamboo and natural fabrics. Each has a little balcony overlooking the gardens. Guests have access to the lovely beach farther up the coast.

La Casa Rosada, *Barrio Marcos Sanchez Diaz, a half-mile left of dock, ☎ 502/7-947-0303, fax 502/7-947-0304, www.hotelcasarosada.com, 10 rooms, $.* This is one of the nicest hotels in Lívingston and it's run by an American couple. It has a lovely riverside garden, a dock and a gazebo. Rooms are in palapa-roofed bungalows with overhead fans and a double bed equipped with a mosquito net. Bathrooms are all shared. The restau-

rant serves seafood and local dishes. Fishing trips and eco-tours are offered. No credit cards.

Hotel Bermudez New Millenium, *by port, ☎ 502/7-947-0476, 27 rooms, $.* Changing the name of this hotel (it used to be the Henry Berrisford) isn't going to change the fact that it's a giant lump of cement that resembles a loaf of bread. But it's reasonably priced and clean. The rooms are tiny, but functional, with TV, fan, private shower and double bed.

Hospedaje Doña Alida, *Barrio Capitania, 2 blocks from center of town, ☎/fax 502/7-947-0027, 9 rooms, $.* This small hotel is just outside of the main circle and that makes all the difference. It's quiet and private with a gorgeous beach and nice restaurant. The rooms are modest, bright and airy. Some have terraces with ocean views and private baths. Breakfast is available upon request. No credit cards.

Hotel Río Dulce, *top of the hill, ☎ 502/7-947-0764, 5 rooms, $.* A tad weather-beaten, this two-storey hotel is a great example of traditional Caribbean style and is one of the oldest buildings in Lívingston. Rooms are airy and spacious, furnished sparingly. The wide verandahs here offer some incredible views and cool ocean breezes.

Hotel Ecologico Salvador Gaviota, *Playa Quechueche, ☎ 502/5-514-3275, 4 cabañas, $$.* This fairly new hotel is set right on the beach on the way to Siete Altares, about 30 minutes walk from town. You can choose between rooms in the main building and thatched cabañas with private baths.

Posada El Delfin, *just past the dock, ☎ 502/7-947-0694, fax 502/7-947-0077, www.turcios.com/eldelfin/home.asp, 24 rooms, $$.* This hotel offers large rooms decorated in Caribbean sunset colors that offer incredible views. Large king-size beds draped with mosquito nets. The restaurant serves a variety of Guatemalan and Mexican food. The fish is exceptional.

WHERE TO EAT

La Casa Rosada, *Barrio Marcos Sanchez Diaz, a half-mile left of dock, ☎ 502/7-947-0303, fax 502/7-947-0304, www.hotelcasarosada.com.* This hotel/restaurant has a lovely riverside garden where you can enjoy great vegetarian meals. Fresh fruit drinks and excellent salads are the specialty. Seafood and local dishes are also offered. Q48-64.

Hotel Río Dulce, *top of the hill, ☎ 502/7-947-0764.* A transplanted chef from Antigua is now cooking incredible meals at Hotel Río Dulce. Dinner might be curried shrimp or pasta in white-wine sauce with clams. Lunch consists of delicious burgers, sandwiches and Garifuna-style rice and beans. This is a great place to watch the sunset. Q 25-50 per person.

> **TIP:** Food has to be brought into Lívingston by boat, so everything is more expensive than in other places. The fish and seafood here are incredible. Make sure you try *tapado* – a stew made from fish, crab, shrimp and other seafood that's been simmered with coconut, plantains and coriander.

Bahía Azul, *downtown, no telephone.* This is a popular tourist spot that serves good grilled fish and shrimp, as well as fish soup. If you're here at cocktail hour, try their potent piña colada. In the evening, authentic live Garífuna music fills the air. Bahía Azul offers eco-tours in the area. Q32-64. No credit cards.

Happy Fish Resort, *Main Street, ☎ 502/7-947-0661, www.happyfishresort.com.* It's not just the fish that are happy here. Most tourists are thrilled with the breakfast menu of fruit and yogurt, pancakes, omelets and delicious coffee. Dinner offers a wide range of grilled seafood and fish. The Happy Fish also offers excellent tours in the surrounding area. Q15-60.

Vecchia Toscini, *right on the beach.* A great place to kick back, watch the sunset and order a delicious pizza straight from the wood-fired oven. They also serve up incredibly delicious pasta. Q10-25 per person.

EL ESTOR

This sleepy fishing village sits on the northwestern shore of Lake Izabal. For many years, the only way to reach it was by ferry from the other side of the lake, but a new, well-paved road starting at Río Dulce has opened up the area. El Estor is slowly emerging as a center for eco-tourism. Locals are currently fighting to save the rivers around the Biotopo Boca del Polochic, as well as their homes, against Canada's Skye Resources, who would like to restart strip-mining in the area.

HISTORY

The **Spanish** first settled El Estor as an out-of-reach storage depot. In the 17th century, Río Dulce was plagued by pirates who plundered whatever goods were on hand. To discourage them, local authorities created a storage facility area on the northwestern edge of the lake. Pirates had to first pass by the fortification, El Castillo, at the mouth of Río Dulce, to reach the area. The plan was only partially successful. In 1867, when piracy had declined worldwide, two **British** entrepreneurs, Skinner and Klee, opened a general store in the area. Since it carried the only European goods for miles around, everyone came to shop there. The Brits named their outpost The Store, which the Spanish-speaking locals pronounced as El Estor. The name stuck and the outpost gradually grew into a small, but isolated, community. The original store is now the Hotel Vista al Lago. In the late 1800s the coffee barons of Cobán, Alta Verapaz, built a railroad into the area to transport their coffee down from the mountains to the lake, where it then traveled to Puerto Barrios. The town enjoyed a boom until the main highway south became the new shipping route; El Estor then slipped back to being a sleepy community with fishing as its main source of income. Lake Izabal is the main supplier of freshwater fish in Guatemala.

In early 1960, high-grade nickel deposits were discovered close to El Estor and in 1965 the Canadian nickel giant, **INCO**, announced a mining project to be run by its Guatemalan subsidiary, Exploraciones Y Explotaciones Mineras Izabal, S.A. (EXIMBAL). In order to get a 40-year mining concession, EXIMBAL agreed to invest in El Estor. Over the next 13 years it built the community into a gem of a village with a town square, paved roads, electricity, a school and a medical clinic. However, due to lack of reliable transportation and technical problems, the mine and processing plant was not a success. In 1977 the plant closed, much to the relief of locals who had witnessed the decimation of the surrounding rivers and forests. The deserted mine and processing plant still stand alongside the prefabricated houses built for a workforce that never arrived. Its giant smokestack has become a landmark and residents use it as a reminder of the dangers of letting corporations manage the area. In the mid-1990s there was some discussion about opening the plant in order to mine cobalt from the mountains, but it was quickly abandoned when the community denied access.

Land conflicts and human rights abuses in El Estor have a long and violent history. Indigenous groups have frequently been the victims of illegal and bloody evictions, and those who advocate on their behalf have been subjected to threats and intimidation. In 1978, the nearby village of Panzo grabbed international headlines for a tragic incident when the Guatemalan army gunned down over 100 innocent men, women and children who were attending a community meeting on land reform. The brutality of the incident shocked the world and brought to attention the many human rights violations stemming from the Guatemalan government in the name of democracy and freedom. Amnesty International turned its eye on El Estor in 1999 when a prominent member of the community went missing. Carlos Coc Rax of the Centro para Accion Legal en Derechos Humanos (CALDH) disappeared on April 21, 1999 after working on a land conflict resolution for the local Q'eqchí. His murder has never been solved, but his death rallied the community. When the oil companies wanted to start drilling here, the community formed Amigos de Lago Izabal and successfully fought to keep the oil multinationals off their lake. Locals refused to be seduced by the promise of jobs and riches and proved to be quite savvy in public relations. They invited the president on a tour of the lake, after which he canceled the oil concession. Environmentalists across the county rejoiced. It was a short-lived victory. Despite the burgeoning eco-tourism industry, mining companies are once again eying the land. El Estor made the news in 2007, when soldiers and workers hired by Skye Resources showed up to evict people from their homes in El Estor and the nearby community of Barrio Revolucion. Tear gas was fired at unarmed groups of women, men and children, while their homes were burnt to the ground. Locals are fighting to prevent strip-mining from once again destroying the community. The regional environmental organization Association of Friends of Lake Izabal (ASALI) and the indigenous rights organization Defensoría Q'eqchi' have received numerous threats. For more information contact www.rightsaction.org/video/elestor/.

> **TIP:** Bring plenty of quetzals with you to El Estor. American dollars are accepted, but at an extremely low rate. There are no ATMs and neither of the banks offer credit card advances. They accept only American Express traveler's checks. If you do get stuck for cash, your only option is to have someone wire you money via Western Union, which takes a whopping 10% cut. You pick up your money from Western Union at the local bank, just off the main square.

GETTING HERE & GETTING AROUND

El Estor is a 45-minute bus ride from Río Dulce. Buses leave every half-hour and costs Q10. This is the only public transportation to El Estor. The ferry boats from Marisco are no longer running, despite what various guidebooks say. The only way to reach El Estor from the other side of the lake is to hire a private boat. You can also hire boats in Río Dulce to take you to El Estor. Prices start at Q150.

An alternative route for those with strong stomachs and backs is the bus from Cobán, Alta Verapaz. El Estor is only 100 miles (150 km) from Cobán, but the road is so bad that the trip takes between five and seven hours. It travels through the beautiful and very scenic Polochíc Valley. You will probably be the only tourist on board.

ADVENTURES ON WATER

POLOCHÍC DELTA REFUGE

Snowy egret

El Refugio de Vida Silvestre Bocas del Polochíc is unique. Three rivers converge on the western shore of Lake Izabal and drain into the lake. **Río Oscuro** (Dark River), named because of its color, drains in from the southwest corner and is a breeding ground for fish. Pristine jungles along the banks of the river are home to howler monkeys. **Río Zarquito** flows along the southern edge of the Polochíc Valley and joins Río Oscuro a few hundred feet up the shore. The water of Río Zarquito is clear, with small lagoons that are breeding grounds for manatees, as well as a bird sanctuary for the rufescent tiger-heron, olivaceous cormorant, snowy egret, ringed kingfisher, American white pelican, greater yellowlegs, least grebe, anhinga and the brown pelican. **Río Polochíc** extends from the Verapaces in central Guatemala down through the Polochíc Valley into Lake Izabal. During the wet season it carries silt and topsoil along its route, creating a delta that forms the second-largest freshwater wetlands in Guatemala.

There is great bio-diversity here – over 250 species of mammals, 350 species, 53 species of fish and 24 species of aquatic plants have been identified so far. Because it forms a biological corridor between the Sierra de las Minas and the Sierra de Santa Cruz, the Polochíc Delta is home to many endangered species. The corridor is part of the larger Mesoamerica Biological Corridor beginning in the Yucatán Peninsula and stretching down to the Panama Canal.

The refuge was declared a protected zone on June 11, 1996. It includes over 962 square miles of humid tropical forest bordered to the north and west by the Sierras de las Minas, on the south by Paxtanto Ruins and on the north by El Estor. The area is managed by the eco-organization **Defensores de la Naturaleza** (Defenders of Nature), which has several ongoing sustainable fisheries and reforestation projects.

Within the reserve is the small Maya Q'eqchi community of **Selempín**. Defensores has worked with the locals to develop a Biological Science Station, offering a number of tours in the reserve.

Their **jungle trek** begins with a 1½-hour boat ride leaving from El Estor and journeying to Río Oscuro. From there it is a short hike up to the Biological Station and two trails. The Cultural Trail journeys through the jungle. It take about 30 minutes to complete. A second trail, La Cotuza, is 2½ miles (four km) long and takes about two hours to complete. Local men from the village act as your guide. You can also rent a bicycle for Q15 per day and visit a nearby African Palm Farm (no admission fee).

The **Aquatic Trail** offers a chance to explore the various channels, mangroves and lagoons in a traditional dugout canoe or inflatable dinghy. Again, local fishermen act as guides. This is an excellent way to spot the shy manatees that inhabit these waters and birdwatch along the way. It's an all-day trip. An inflatable dinghy runs Q40 per day and the fee to do the Aquatic Trail is Q15.

Accommodations at the station are in four rustic cabins that can accommodate up to 40 people. There's a kitchen and common area. All buildings are made from local materials and use solar energy. The women of Selempín provide meals and give demonstrations on how to make corn tortillas. The income from the tour goes directly to the community. The complete tour is two to three days long. Accommodations with meals are Q55 per person; accommodations only are Q30 per person.

Among the options here, all leaving from El Estor, are a private boat, owned by an individual in El Estor, available at Q500 (maximum of six people); the Defensores Boat, for Q700 (maximum of 12 people); and the Public Ferry, at Q40 (Wednesdays and Saturdays only).

POLOCHÍC DELTA REFUGE TOUR COMPANY

For more information or to make a reservation, contact **Defensores de la Naturaleza**, 5a Av and 2a Calle Esquina, El Estor, ☎ 502/7-949-7237, 5-815-1736, www.defensores.org.gt, asisbocas@defensores.org.gt.

A few other operations in town offer this tour, but they charge almost double the price and the money does not reach the community. Defensores remains the best place to book eco-tours in El Estor.

EL AMATILLO LAGOON, BOCAS DE POLOCHÍC

Close to where the Río Oscuro and Río Zarquito meet there is a small lagoon with warm shallow waters that are perfect for swimming. El Amatillo Lagoon is also close to Padre Creek, an area that has excellent fishing and schools of tarpon are so abundant they can be caught by simply putting a net in the waters. A typical tour in a private boat takes three to four hours and includes a visit to El Amatillo as well as a journey through the river channels where howler monkeys, birds and manatees live. Morning is the best time of day to take this tour, since the lake is still relatively calm. Afternoon winds tend to stir up the water, making it choppy and difficult to navigate. The earlier you go, the more animals you will see, particularly the families of howler monkeys who congregate along the banks of the river to watch the sunrise. Cost is Q250 for up to two people.

EL AMATILLO LAGOON TOUR GUIDES

Oscar Paz from Hotel Vista al Lago, 6a Av 1-13, Zona 1, can help arrange a boat and guide for you. You can also make inquiries at **Restaurante Hugo's**.

FINCA EL PARAISO

Río Aguas Calientes runs underground through the Sierra de Santa Cruz mountain range before emerging as a waterfall where it meets the freshwater of Lake Izabal. The results are a hot thermal waterfall pouring into a cold freshwater pool that creates a natural Jacuzzi. The waterfalls are located on a private farm, Finca el Paraiso. To reach the river you follow a trail past some fields and into the jungle. The spot is idyllic – perfect for swimming, picnics or lounging on one of the giant rocks along the riverbank. The trail continues up to **Grutas Paraiso**, a series of caves where the river emerges. The caves are fascinating, but difficult and dangerous to explore on your own. You should hire a guide at the visitor's center. The falls get extremely crowded on the weekends when local families come to enjoy the hot springs. Open from dawn until dusk. Admission is Q10 for adults, Q5 for children.

WARNING: Be careful climbing in and out of the water, as the rocks are slippery. Don't hang around after dark here.

GETTING HERE: *Finca el Paraiso is 45 minutes from Río Dulce. Buses to El Estor leave there every half-hour and tickets are Q10. From El Estor, it's another 15 minutes by bus to the falls. Buses leave whenever they are full (usually every 30 minutes) and tickets are Q5. You can hire a private taxi from Río Dulce for Q150, round-trip.*

PARQUE ECOLÓGICO DEL BOQUERÓN

Río Sauce empties into the lake on its northern shore just five miles (eight km) from El Estor. At the point where the river meets Lake Izabal, it turns into a canyon with 820-foot (250-meter) cliffs on either side. The flow of water over the large rocks have formed abstract figures in the canyon walls, creating a natural art gallery. The best way to see the canyon is by boat and several *cayuceros* (local boatmen with canoes) will paddle upriver and point out the shapes. The most famous rocks are shaped lie a Maya king, an elephant rock and a jaguar. Get off where the river temporarily trickles to a stop and you can hike up to five more set of rapids. En route you'll pass caves that you can explore. The scenery really is breathtaking. Tours of just the rock formation take a little over a half-hour and cost Q10 per person. Hiking to the rapids can take up to three hours and usually costs Q50 per person.

> GETTING HERE: *Buses from Río Dulce leave every 30 minutes and cost Q10. The ride takes about 45 minutes. Buses from El Estor to Boquerón leave every 20-30 minutes and cost Q5 for the 10-minute ride. You can hire a cab for about Q60, round-trip. You should not visit here at dusk or after dark.*

CULTURAL ADVENTURES

Asociación Feminina Q'eqchí in Barrio San Francisco is a community project started in 1990 to help the women in El Estor earn a living. The women have been trained to weave and sew using traditional methods that were taught by people from the Highlands. Today, the collective runs a successful business weaving fabric and sewing it into clothing and handbags. Visitors are welcome to visit for a tour of the looms and a demonstration. A small shop sells variety of crafts, including magnificent handbags, at prices that are lower than those in any of the larger markets. The quality just as good. Open daily from 8 am until 6 pm. Donations are welcome. No phone.

WHERE TO STAY

HOTEL PRICE CHART

Prices are per person

$	under US $25
$$	US $26-50
$$$	US $51-85
$$$$	US $86-125
$$$$$	over US $125

There aren't many luxury hotels in El Estor, but there are a couple of well-run family hotels that are comfortable and affordable. Most of the budget hotels are not pleasant. The best rooms are those by the lake or with a garden. Be sure to get a room with an overhead fan if you don't get the lake breeze.

Hotel Marisabela, *8a Av and 1a Calle, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-949-7206, 12 rooms, $.* This is the nicest hotel in El Estor, with cushy double beds dressed in

lovely linens. The modern bathrooms have hot water and rooms have cable TV. Rooms offer lake views and get a wonderful breeze. One room has five beds, which makes it a great choice for families. A giant terrace with chairs and tables is surrounded by trees and overlooks Lake Izabal. The restaurant serves Italian and Guatemalan lunches and dinners upon request. Their breakfasts are quite good. The owner, Doña Isabel de Mane, speaks English and knows everyone in town. She can arrange boat and fishing tours.

Hotel Los Almendros, *past Texaco gas station off main square, ☎ 502/7-948-7182, 14 rooms, $.* Nestled in a small garden away from the main square, this hotel is the quietest in town. It has the feel of an old country cottage with its wooden frames and doors. Large rooms, set off a long corridor, have a good double bed, overhead fans, refrigerators and cable TV. It's a 15-minute walk to town.

Hotel Vista al Lago, *6a Av 1-13, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-949-7205, 21 rooms, $.* This lovely historical building is the original store opened by the two Englishmen (see page 397 for the full story). The rooms on the first floor are extremely tiny and are big enough for only one person. Rooms at the back are dark and get very hot. Request a second-floor room. They are bigger and have a view of the lake.

Hospedaje La Posada Don Juan, *main square, ☎ 502/7-949-7296, 7 rooms, $.* This is the cheapest hotel in town and it's usually full of backpackers. It's a good place for hooking up with fellow travelers. Small, clean and cool rooms with private baths open up onto a lovely courtyard filled with plants and flowers. This used to be a home before it was converted into a hotel, and it retains a homey atmosphere. The doors close at 10 pm. No credit cards.

Hotel de Central, *main square, ☎ 502/7-949-7497, 12 rooms, $.* This is a clean hotel with rather generic rooms that have ceiling fans, two hard single beds, TV and showers without hot water. There is a lovely terrace where you can watch all the action in the central square. This is a good family hotel. No credit cards.

Santa Clara Hotel, *2 Calle and 5 Av, ☎ 502/7-949-7244, 34 rooms, $.* The Santa Clara is squeaky clean, but that doesn't stop it from being mildly depressing. Perhaps it is the soft-as-butter mattresses, the windowless and fanless rooms, or the shared bathrooms that offer only cold water. If you need to check in here, get a front room upstairs; they at least have a private bath, windows and a nice terrace with a lake view. The family who runs this hotel is really very helpful. No credit cards.

Hotel Ecológico Cabañas del Lago, *end of Calle 1a along the lake, ☎ 502/7-949-7546, 4 cabins, $$.* This is the same Hugo of Hugo's restaurant (see below). The cabins are built with natural woods and have small kitchens, a seating area, bathrooms and two double beds. There is no hot water, air conditioning or overhead fans and electricity is produced by a generator. There's a very nice private beach alongside a palapa restaurant where canoes are available for rent. A variety of animals wander the grounds, adding an exotic atmosphere. The property is still being built and so has an unfinished air about it. It's a tad overpriced, but Hugo is open to negotiation. No credit cards.

Turicentro El Paraiso, *just across highway from Finca Paraiso waterfalls, ☎ 502/7-230-3038, 13 rooms, 7 cabins, $.* This charming rustic hotel sits on the riverbank and offers a sandy beach. It has seven basic bungalows that can sleep four people. There are private baths but no hot water. A nice campground has space for tents or a hammock. The restaurant next door serves simple meals like eggs, hamburgers, rice and beans. Food prices are a little bit steep, considering the basic food. No credit cards.

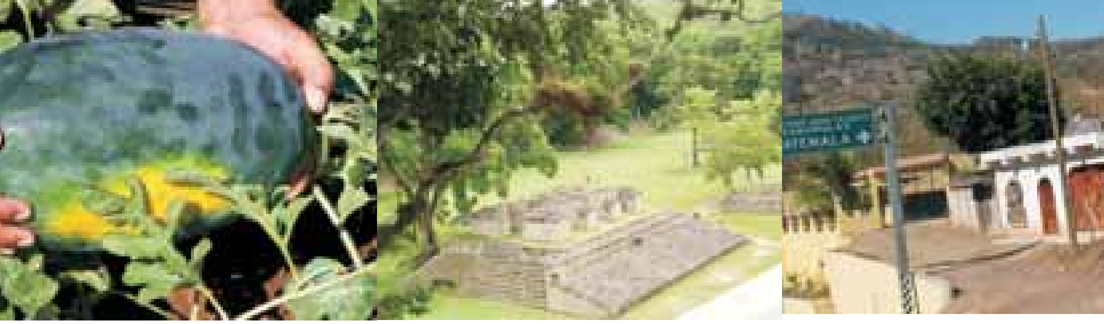
WHERE TO EAT

It's slim pickings in El Estor. No credit cards accepted at any of these restaurants.

Hugo's Restaurant, *main square.* In front of the restaurant is the ice cream parlor selling the delicious Sarita's ice cream – the best in Guatemala. In back is Hugo's, which has a basic menu of hamburgers, roast chicken, rice and beans and other fried foods. It sometimes offers fresh fish. Q15-40.

Restaurant Vereda, *main square.* This large eatery offers daily specials as well as excellent chicken sandwiches, hamburgers, French fries and salads. They have good fresh *licuados* and fruit juice. Q15-30.

Rancho Tipico Chaabil Restaurant, *Muelle de Piedra, down from main square, ☎ 502/7-949-7272.* The only fancy restaurant in the area, Rancho Tipico is overpriced. You can't beat the location, though, which is right on the lake. All the furnishings are made from giant rainforest trees and there's even tree-stump tables. While waiting for your meal, count the rings and contemplate how 300-year-old trees ended up holding fried fish dinners. The fish dishes are excellent, but other dishes are not. Avoid the expensive seafood dinners, especially the *tapado* stew, which they claim is a local specialty (it's really from Lívingston, and the folks here haven't perfected the recipe yet). The service is terrible, but friendly. Bring bug spray, because the mosquitoes like this place. Q35-80.



Eastern Plains

Encompassing the departments of **El Progreso, Zacapa, Jalapa, Jutiapa** and **Chiquimula**, the Eastern Plains have some of the most varied landscape in the country. The only desert in Central America is home to rare cacti. Its dry dusty landscape soon gives way to rolling hills with subtropical forests, volcanic peaks and sulfur lakes. This area is still primarily a rural district more famous for its incredible produce than for its tourist attractions. There are many beautiful colonial churches, fine nature trails and pristine lakes and rivers to explore. The drawback is that there is no tourist infrastructure. However, if you speak some Spanish and don't mind planning your own outings or roughing it, then you'll enjoy a visit to this area. You will not run into many tourists. Highlights of the department include the **church** in Esquipulas, **Ipala Volcano** and the **Museum of Paleontology** in Estazula. The ruins of **Copán** in Honduras are a hop, skip and jump away.

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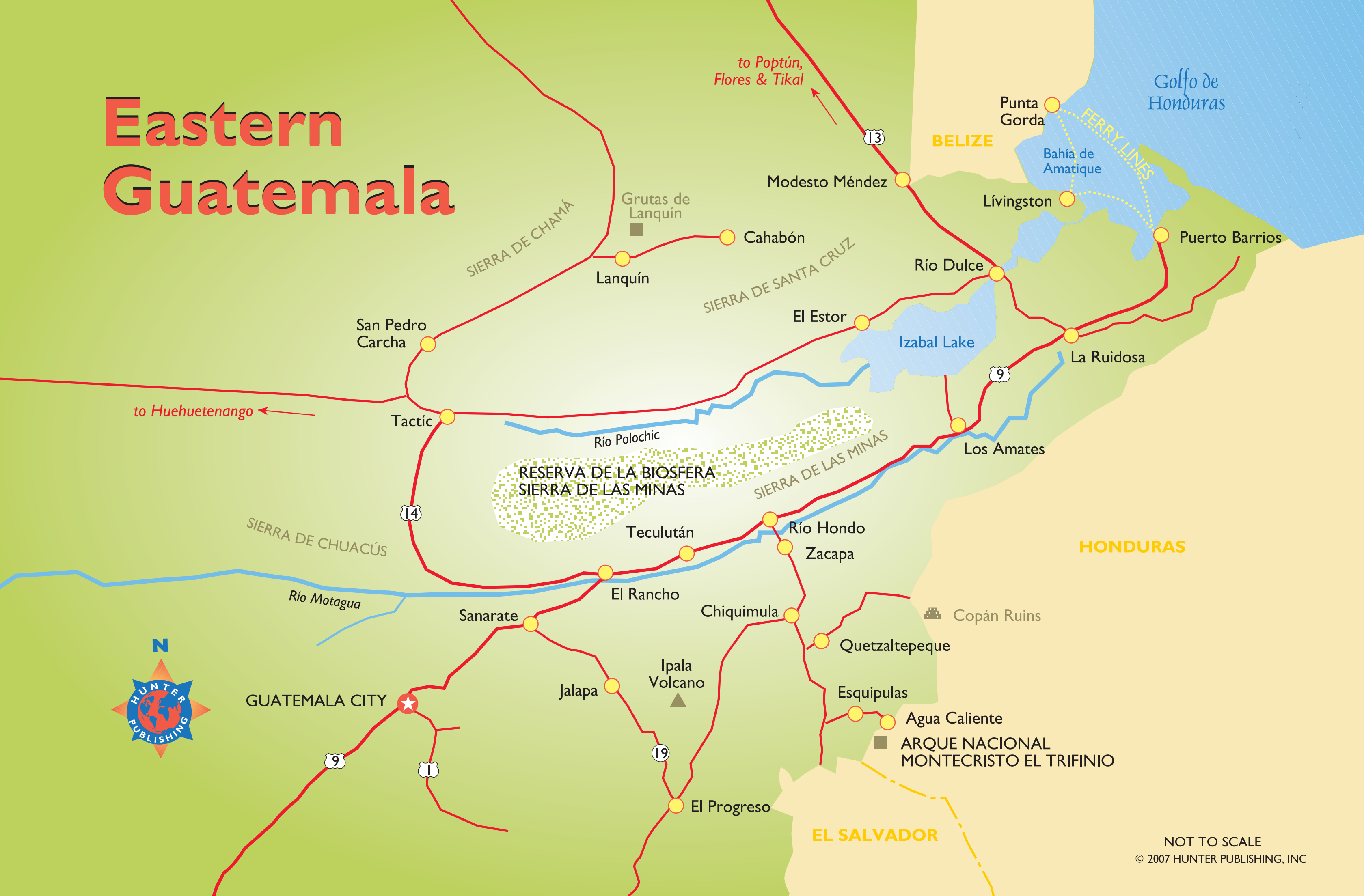
Department of Zacapa

Zacapa, or River of Grass, was named for the fertile valleys found near Río Motagua. Bordered on the north by the department of Izabal and Alta Verapaz, to the west by El Progresso and to the east by Chiquimula, it also shares an eastern border with Honduras. Zacapa is organized into 10 municipalities: **Zacapa, Estanzuela, Río Hondo, La Unión, Gualán, Teculután, Usumatlán, San Diego, Huite** and **Cabañas**.

The department stretches from the foothills of the Sierra de las Minas mountains down into the Zacapa Valley. Its lush cloud forests give way to verdant valleys and gradually change into dry desert. It's sunny and

Eastern Guatemala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hot (it never gets below 80° F/26° C), making it a prime agricultural area. Melon, tobacco, sugar, coffee, potato, tomato, watermelon, papaya, chile pepper, corn, yucca, cucumber and beans are the main crops. In fact, Zacapa supplies most of North America with melons. The area is also well-known for its cheeses, woven hats and ceramic tiles.

© Raja Rc/Dreamstime

Watermelon harvesting

The extreme dryness allows a rare type of cacti ecosystem to exist. Known as **thorny chaparral**, this ecosystem is home to the rare and endangered Zacapa scorpion. Anyone interested in geology can see that these valleys have been through many climate changes. Layers of sediment contain a rich legacy of animal fossils indicating these once dry hills were fertile grassland savannas dotted with freshwater lakes and rivers. Massive mastodon skeletons found here are on display at the Museum of Paleontology in Estanzuela.

Three major rivers connect in Zacapa – **Río Montagua, Río San José** and **Río Hondo** supply most of the area's water. Closer to the mountains the rivers are cold and fresh, but as you progress south they become hot and sulfuric, the side-product of which are hot springs and baths.

HISTORY

Scientists and archeologists are just starting to research this area. They believe it is the first location settled by the **Nahuatl** people of Mexico as they expanded their kingdom. More than likely, they were drawn here by the rich jade and obsidian found in the Sierra de las Minas mountain range and volcanoes. Preliminary mappings show several major sites waiting to be restored and support the theory that this was a main trade route for the Maya. By the 7th century, the Nahuatl culture had been absorbed into the **Ch'orti'** and **Pipil Maya**, but the Nahuatl legacy is still found in names of cities and villages.

In 1524, the region was taken over by **Don Pedro de Alvarado** who also came to exploit the area's riches. In this case, it was the wide valleys with good soil and an Indian population already enslaved that attracted him. A road from Zacapa to Izabal was built in the 16th century to transport goods and by the 17th century much of the land had been deforested for cattle and horse ranches. The Conquistadors behaved no differently here than in the rest of the region and the Indian population was treated brutally and enslaved to work on farms. This set the stage for centuries of vicious oppression. During the Civil War, hundreds of Indians were unjustly branded as Communists and murdered. To make matters worse, Zacapa lies on the San Agustín-Motagua fault line that essentially divides Guatemala's mountains in half. This means it gets the worst of any earthquakes. On February 3, 1976, an earthquake decimated the department. Just as things were beginning to improve, Hurricane Mitch descended in 1998, destroying villages, uprooting crops and killing residents. The department is slowly recovering with the help of a number of international relief programs.

Spanish speakers have a big advantage here and may be able to arrange for a guide to show them hot springs or take them into the foothills. But keep in mind that tourist services are non-existent and it will be slow-going to get a tour plan off the ground.

GUALÁN

The sleepy rural town of Gualán, close to the department of Izabal, has some lovely colonial architecture to admire. But aside from enjoying the view of Río Motagua from the Zamora Bridge or taking a stroll in peaceful central park, there is little else to do. The church is quite beautiful and there is an excellent market with local wares and fresh produce.

The highway out to Gualán is very scenic, offering panoramic views of the distant Sierra De la Minas mountains in the background. It follows the Motagua Valley down from the mountains, eventually ending in the city of Zacapa. Nature hikes to nearby forests and hot baths on the outskirts of town are the favored activities.

WHERE TO STAY & EAT

There isn't much choice in this small town. Accommodations are really basic – you'll get a bed, overhead fan, shared bathroom and no hot water. All are budget options.

Hospedaje Sigui, *Barrio la Estación, ☎ 502/7-933-2141, 8 rooms, $.* Clean, quiet rooms with just the basics – bed, overhead fan, dresser and bathroom. No credit cards.

Hotel y Cafeteria Jully, *4a Calle 6-19, Zona 4, Barrio la Estación, ☎ 502/7-933-2506, 14 rooms, $.* Rooms are comfortable and very clean. The cafeteria serves hearty country-style food and offers daily specials. No credit cards.

RÍO HONDO (WATER PARK HAVEN)

This small area is a junction between the two main highways of CA-9 (Ruta al Atlántico, the main road to Guatemala City) and CA-10 (the main highway south to Chiquimula, El Salvador and Honduras). It's a quirky blend of commercial industry and vacation resorts and is known for its pottery, grapes and the new hydro project. Primarily, though, it's the water parks that attract most people. Locals from Guatemala City and the surrounding areas come here on weekends to frolic in the huge pools. Tour groups passing through to Tikal or Copán, Honduras also use this as a stopover. These large hotels all have modern facilities, pools, secure parking and good restaurants.

WHERE TO STAY, PLAY & EAT

Hotel y Turicentro Valle Dorado, *Km 149, Ruta al Atlántico, ☎ 502/2-385-2880, or 7-943-6666, http://hotelvalledorado.com, 75 rooms ($$$), 10 bungalows ($$$$), 12 suites ($$$$$+).* This hotel has an enormous water park with rides that include the Lazy River (*El Perezoso*), a wave pool (*el tumbo*), and a giant waterslide (*el Super Splash*). Set against the backdrop of La Sierra de las Minas mountains, the park is loads of fun, especially if you are traveling with kids. Unfortunately, the rooms are incredibly overpriced, especially considering the dismal 1950s décor and complete lack of luxury amenities. Most people stay at one of the other hotels and visit here for the day. Entrance fees are US $6 per adult, US $5 per child. Open daily from 8 am to sunset.

Longarone Hotel, *Km 126, Ruta al Atlántico, behind Shell Station, ☎ 502/7-933-0488, fax 502/2-368-2059, www.hotel-longarone.com, 71 rooms, $-$$.* Despite its bizarre location behind the gas station (it was built before the station), this hotel is quite pleasant. Rooms are either in the row building or in duplex bungalows. All have pleasant décor, refrigerator, air conditioning, private bath and cable TV. The property has a restaurant, bar, tennis court, small zoo, rock climbing and four swimming pools – two large pools for the adults, two small pools for the kids.

Hotel y Restaurante Pasabien, *Km 126, Ruta al Atlántico, ☎/fax 502/7-934-7201, 29 rooms, $$.* This is one of the newer hotels. Its spacious rooms are a bit on the noisy side. Standard rooms have cable TV, air conditioning, private bath and a mini-bar (cheaper rooms have overhead fans and no a/c). There's a gigantic pool with a nice bar, a pleasant lobby and the restaurant is the best in the area.

Hotel al Atlántico, *Km 126, Ruta al Atlántico, ☎ 502/7-934-7160, 56 rooms, $$.* This is probably the best bargain in the area. The hotel is nicely laid out with attractive buildings on lovely grounds filled with flowers. Rooms are actually private bungalows with large queen-size beds, air conditioning, private baths and cable TV. There is an excellent restaurant and lovely pool.

CITY OF ZACAPA

The city of Zacapa is situated along the banks of Río San José and was officially recognized as a municipality on November 10, 1871. Long before that it had been an important commercial center, playing a key economic role as the central shipping point for all agricultural products in the area. It experienced a real boom when it was added to the Guatemala City-Puerto Barrios railway line built by the United Fruit Company. It quickly developed into a manufacturing center with ties to El Salvador and Honduras.

Railway bridge

Today, the city remains an economic center and its connections to the capital and coast are strong. The 17th-century **Metropolitan Cathedral** is worth a visit. Take a look at the hand-painted fresco behind the altar and admire the sheer size of its two towers and large dome. The town also has an antique railway station and bridge, and its market is the largest in the region. It carries local crafts, such as the unique stylized embroidery from Estanzuela and dark limestone pottery from the village of San Luis Jilotepeque. Close by are some good hot springs.

Since there are no tourist facilities, you will have to ask one of the locals to tell you where the hot springs are.

SIGHTSEEING

Museum of Paleontology (Museo de Paleontologia), *Km 140, Highway CA-10. No phone*. The tiny town of Estanzuela is notable for its excellent museum with its world-class collection of dinosaur and giant mastodon bones over 30,000 years old. The complete mastodon skeleton with its tusks intact is especially impressive. Along the walls are historical timelines and displays of Maya ceramics and artifacts. There is also an excellent exhibit of a Maya burial tomb complete with skull and offerings. Close by the museum along the highway is a monument marking the famous fault of Motagua and those who died in the 1976 earthquake. Open 8 am to noon, 1-5 pm, Monday-Saturday. Admission is free. Large blue signs along Highway CA-10 will point you in the right direction.

WHERE TO STAY & EAT

Hotel Miramundo, *17 Av 5-41, Zona 3, ☎ 502/7-941-2674, 40 rooms, $$$$*. This is the only hotel in town, but fortunately it is large, clean and comfortable. Some rooms even have cable TV. All have overhead fans and private bathrooms. The hotel also has a restaurant that serves simple tasty food, such as roasted chicken and *tamales*.

Department of El Progreso

The department of El Progreso shares a northern border with Alta Verapaz and Baja Verapaz, an eastern border with Zacapa and Jalapa and a western border with the department of Guatemala. It is a place of stark contrasts, with summits of lush tropical rainforest and valleys that turn into dry deserts the farther they are from the mountains. It is divided into eight main municipalities: **Guastatoya, Morazán, San Agustín Acasaguastlán, San Cristóbal Acasaguastlán, El Jícaro, Sansare, Sanarate** and **San Antonio La Paz**. While agriculture is limited, the region still produces tobacco, sugar, tomatoes, yucca, beans and corn. Locals breed bulls and there's even a school for matadors. Industrious locals produce excellent honey, woven baskets, wooden carvings, leatherwork, furniture, musical instruments and carpets. But El Progresso's most appreciated contribution to the country is fireworks. They are, without a doubt, the most popular item at any party.

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Pretty flower of the tobacco plant

The capital city, **Guastatoya**, was annexed to El Progreso in 1908 when it was made an official department. The city used to be famous for its beautiful colonial architecture. Unfortunately, the whole community was leveled in the earthquake of 1976 and has since been rebuilt without its former charm. It remains an important hub for commerce.

Two restoration projects in the villages of **San Agustín Acasaguastlán**, **San Cristóbal Acasaguastlán** are also bringing considerable attention to this region. Their colonial cathedrals are being restored to their former glory and promise to be on par with the cathedral and churches found in Antigua. Also of note is the **Orellana bridge** that crosses Río Motagua near Sanarate. This beautiful iron suspension bridge was first erected in 1927 and is one of the oldest bridges in Central America. For many years it was the only crossing in the area.

The few tour agencies that visit this region concentrate on the phenomenal **Sierra de las Minas Biosphere Reserve**. Eco-tours to this reserve are some of the most exciting in the country. The reserve can be visited only by special permit.

With the exception of the biosphere, you can easily head out on your own to explore, either on your way to and from Guatemala City or Antigua.

SAN AGUSTÍN ACASAGUASTLÁN

The **San Agustín Cathedral** in this small village is easily spotted along the Ruta Atlántico. Its white bell tower hovers invitingly over the horizon, offset by the incredible greenery of the area. Built in the 16th century, this baroque temple underwent restorations all through the 17th and 18th centuries when it was damaged in a series of earthquakes. Inside, a series of crèches feature statues of saints. The building fell into disrepair in the 20th century, but the latest restoration project should return it to its former glory. The church is still used by the locals for masses and religious ceremonies. Nearby, a charming central plaza is filled with papaya and orange fruit trees.

The local **hot springs** are one mile (1.6 km) south of the town on the banks of Río Morazán. The area is popular with locals, but is not served by public transportation. Arrange for a taxi in town (Q30) or try hiking out. Many families enjoy the hot baths near the Pericas bridge.

SAN CRISTÓBAL ACASAGUASTLÁN

San Cristóbal Acasaguastlán is two miles (3.2 km) north of San Agustín on the other side of CA-9. The splendid 1654 **San Cristóbal Cathedral** has an elaborate baroque exterior. The restoration project is being undertaken to undo damage caused by years of neglect. The church has not been used for over a century.

WHERE TO STAY & EAT

Unfortunately, El Progreso doesn't have much to offer in the way of hotels or restaurants. Head west to Antigua, east to Jalapa or south to Chiquimula for a hotel.

Hotel Casa Guastatoya, *Barrio El Calvario, Parque Central, Guastatoya Village, ☎ 502/7-945-1589.* This is a basic hotel with a double bed, small dresser, overhead fans, and private bathrooms. There is a small pool and okay restaurant on site as well. 10 rooms. $

Turicentro Guaytán, *Barrio Guaytán, San Agustín Acasaguastlán, ☎ 502/7-945-1514, 16 rooms, $.* Considering its remote location, this hotel isn't bad. Rooms are neat and fairly large. They have overhead fans, share bathrooms and cable TV. The hotel's restaurant, with standard Guatemalan fare, is about the only place to eat.

SIERRA DE LAS MINAS BIOSPHERE

HISTORY

The Sierra de las Minas Biosphere is one of the last truly wild areas in Guatemala. It runs for over 100 miles (160 km) south to east from the departments of El Progreso, north from Los Verapaces, and west to Zacapa and Izabal. The reserve consists of the top of the mountain range, which is 30 miles wide (48 km), two miles high (83.2 km) and sits 9,840 feet (299 meters) above sea level. Since the area is so large, it includes both tropical and coniferous forests.

Harpy eagle

The reserve is extremely valuable. It contains 60% of Guatemala's remaining cloud forest habitat, is home to many endangered species, and is the only place in Central America where the harpy eagle has been spotted. Over 885 species of birds, mammals, amphibians and reptiles live here. Seventeen distinct species of evergreen grow here – most found nowhere else on earth. Conservationist and agroforestry experts believe it to be an irreplaceable seed resource for the whole of the tropics. It is also the principal source of water for the Polochíc, Hondo, Morazán, Chilascó and Montagua rivers. These rivers are the main water supply for over a thousand communities in the area.

Pinalón is the highest summit, rising to 9,186 feet (2,800 meters) above sea level. While certainly not the highest peak in Guatemala, it is one of the coldest, and it's covered with large pine, fir and cypress trees. The lost **jade mines** of the ancient Maya were discovered in the Sierras at this meeting of the North American and Caribbean plates. The jade here is unique to this area and differs in color from Oriental jade. Little archeological research has been done, although it is obvious the area was of prime importance to the Maya – jade was their principal mineral, considered more important than gold.

Saving this unique and rugged wilderness has been a main focus of the Guatemalan conservation group Fundación de los Defensores de la Naturaleza (Defenders of Nature). They fought a long battle to have the mountains be granted protection and in October 1990 the Guatemalan legislature decreed the Sierra de las Minas as a biosphere reserve and appointed Fundación de los Defensores de la Naturaleza as its manager. The reserve is still in danger from deforestation by the local population who planted sugarcane, rice, coffee and cardamom alongside cattle farms. Indiscriminate logging has also hurt the reserve. To make matters worse, the current government changed the perimeters of the park in July 2002, leaving the area vulnerable to logging companies. Fundación de los Defensores is mounting an international campaign to restore the park boundaries and is appealing to UNESCO for help.

ADVENTURES ON FOOT

LAS NUBES DE SAN AGUSTÍN ACASAGUASTLÁN

It is hoped that by opening up the area to eco-tourism, the reserve can be saved from development. In 1994, a 20-mile wilderness trail was completed through the western end of the Sierra. Local members of the Q'ekchí and Pokomchí Maya communities act as guides. Contact Fundación Defensores de la Naturaleza (see page 415).

Cloud forest

Starting at Las Nubes Finca in San Agustín Acasaguastlán, the trail leads up to the community of Los Albores and a forest of the same name. Part of the forest, El Bosques Eterno de los Niños de Suecia (Eternal Forest of the Children of Sweden) was named for a group of Swedish children who donated funds to create the trail.

The trail into Los Albores goes through a variety of ecosystems, starting in a coniferous forest of cedar, oak, mahogany, cypress, pine and willow trees and ending in a humid cloud forest. The trek from coniferous to cloud forest takes a little over two hours. The La Cabaña Scientific Station is located at this point. From there, the trail spreads out in several directions. Along the El Trueno (Thunder Trail) trail are the wellsprings for the Polochíc, Hondo, Morazán, Chilascó and Montagua rivers. The trail is named for the amazing displays of lightning and thunder seen this high up.

La Peña del Angel (Angel Rock)

La Peña del Angel is a peak 8,202 feet (2,499 meters) above sea level in a microclimate of ferns, orchids and bromeliads scattered among pine and oak trees. It towers above the cloud forest canopy and on clear days you can see over to Agua Volcano near Antigua. The shy quetzal bird is easily spotted here, along with hummingbirds, robins, wrens, hawks and woodpeckers. Other residents include white-tailed deer, coyotes, monkeys, squirrels and lizards. It is a strenuous two-hour hike to La Peña del Angel from La Cabaña Scientific Station.

WHERE TO STAY & EAT

Accommodations are available at the scientific station, which has four rustic cabins equipped with single beds, screened windows and shared bathrooms. Each cabin sleeps up to four people. The women of Los Albores Community provide all the meals. A guide must be used and you should be in reasonable shape to complete this trip.

SIERRA DE LAS MINAS TOUR COMPANY

For further information and prices, contact the **Fundación Defensores de la Naturaleza**, 7 Av 7-09, Zona 15, ☎ 502/ 2-440-8138 or 2-369-0231, www.defensores.org.gt.

Department of Chiquimula

Chiquimula is the most southern department. It shares a border with Honduras and El Salvador, and the departments of Jutiapa, Jalapa and Zacapa. The Mataquescuintla Mountains here have long-dormant volcanoes over 370 million years old. Volcanic ash has created fertile soil making it a prime agricultural zone also rich in minerals such as iron, gold and silver. Historically, this department was an important commercial route between Zacapa, Izabal and Guatemala City. Today, its primary crops are coffee, tobacco, bananas and pineapples. **Jocotán**, **Quetzaltepeque** and **Camotán** are famous for their blacksmiths who produce quality machetes.

It has an extremely hot climate in all of its 11 municipalities, which include **Chiquimula, Camotán, Concepción las Minas, Esquipulas, Ipala, Jocotán, Olopa, Quezaltepeque, San Jacinto, San José La Arada** and **San Juan Ermita**. The majority of people speak Ch'orti' Maya. Linguistic experts have established that the Ch'orti' language is the one remaining dialect most closely resembling that used by the ancient Maya on stelae. Interestingly, the Ch'orti' Maya have kept their strong tradition and ancient rituals. In Olopa and Jocotán, there are members of the Consel of Oxlajuj, an organization of Maya shamans and priests dedicated to keeping traditions alive.

Most Chiquimula residents do not wear indigenous costumes. However, in Olopa and Jocatan the men wear white trousers with colored shirts and hats made from palms. The women wear striped skirts and silk blouses with braids attached.

The main tourist attractions are the **Basilica of the Black Christ** in Esquipulas – the largest pilgrimage site in Latin America – and Ipala Volcano with its crater lake.

CHIQUIMULA CITY

Main plaza, with church

During the 1800s the city of Chiquimula was bestowed the title of Muy Noble y Muy Leal (Most Noble and Most Loyal) for its contribution to the country's economy. Today, it is known as the Pearl of the Orient (*Perla de Oriente*) and is still an important commercial center. Little remains of the colonial architecture and the city has a rather scruffy appearance. You can see the ruins of the first cathedral on the outskirts of town; it was destroyed in the 1765 earthquake. The current **Metropolitan Cathedral**, a lovely copy of the original, is just off the central plaza. The city's other claim to fame is as the hometown of two of Guatemala's most famous poets, **Humberto Porta Mencos** (1908-1965) and **Miguel Angel Vásquez** (born in 1922). Although there is not much tourism in this city, it's still busy since everyone in the Eastern Plains comes here to shop or sell their goods. The main market is a hive of activity. The city also serves as the main transportation hub and the jumping off-point for visits to the Copán ruins in Honduras.

Colorful buildings

This is a very easy town to navigate. All the services you need – banks or exchange booths – are located just off the main square. Both bus terminals are on Calle 2 between Avs 10 and 11.

WHERE TO STAY

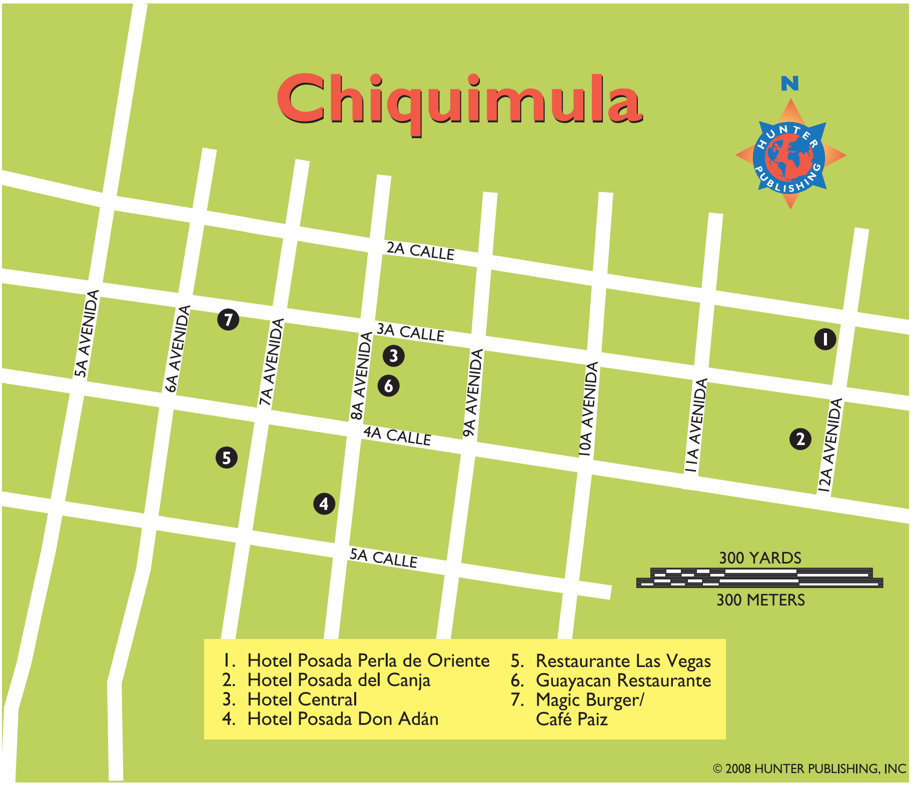
Chiquimula is well known for its cheap and cheerful hotels. You don't need reservations unless you are visiting during their August patron saint festival. All properties are in the budget range.

Hotel Posada Perla de Oriente, *12a Av, ☎ 502/7-942-0152, 25 rooms, $*. This is the largest hotel in town with the smallest swimming pool and restaurant area. Its basic rooms have double beds, overhead fans, bathrooms (hot water is not guaranteed) and cable TV. There's no air conditioning. No credit cards.

Hotel Central, *3a Calle 8-30, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-942-6352, 5 rooms, $.* This tiny hotel has a friendly atmosphere and is just steps from the central market and bus station. Rooms have air conditioning, private baths and cable TV. The nicest feature are the small balconies that look down on the bustling streets. No credit cards.

Hotel Posada Don Adan, *8a Av 4-30, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-942-0549, 18 rooms, $.* Señora Adan runs this spotless hotel. It's a great value as all rooms have air conditioning, private bath, cable TV and telephone. There is free parking and an excellent little restaurant serving delicious home-cooked meals. No credit cards.

Hotel Posada del Canja, *Km 171, Ruta a Esquipulas, ☎ 502/7-942-0323, 52 rooms, $$.* This hotel is conveniently located on the main highway to Esquipulas. It's the largest and fanciest property in the area and has a large pool, a restaurant and meeting facilities. Rooms are comfortable, with rather generic furnishings, and all have air conditioning, lots of hot water, double- or queen-sized beds, telephones, cable TV and room service. Free parking is available.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2. Hotel Posada del Canja
3. Hotel Central
4. Hotel Posada Don Adán
5. Restaurante Las Vegas
6. Guayacan Restaurante
7. Magic Burger/ Café Paiz
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WHERE TO EAT

The best places to eat in Chiquimula are the small *comedores* that line the central park. All serve cheap, delicious meals at prices that won't bust the budget, about Q15-30.

Guayacán Restaurant, *3a Calle 8-30, Zona 1.* This restaurant is popular with locals who come for the grilled meats, including *carnitas* (beef stew), *costilla* (ribs) and *salchica* (sausage). Also on the menu are chile rellenos and tamales. Q25-35. No credit cards.

Magic Burger, *3a Calle, behind the church.* This small restaurant serves the usual fast food combinations of hamburgers, hot dogs and pizza. Oddly, it also offers great fresh juices. Next door, **Cafe Paiz** (part of a large grocery store) serves good drinks and sandwiches. Q15-20. No credit cards.

Restaurante Las Vegas, *7a Av 4-40.* This is the poshest place in town and it's decorated in an upscale style with plants and artwork. Meals are fairly basic, consisting of pastas, sandwiches, salads and meat and chicken dishes. It has a great bar and is the only place in town open late. Q40-60. No credit cards.

COPÁN RUINS, HONDURAS

Copán was one of the largest southern Maya cities during the Classic period. Its ornate buildings and sculptures have made it one of the greatest artistic and architectural treasures in the Americas. Beautifully rendered carvings and sculptures of the city's various kings are displayed on platforms, pyramids, stairways and plazas throughout the site. It is most famous for its 3-D round stelae. This type of structure is found only at one other site, Quiriguá, a satellite city of Copán.

Wall carvings

HISTORY

The Copán valley was one of the first places to be inhabited in the Americas; ceramic pieces found in graves here carbon-date to 1200 BC. The **Olmecs**, forefathers to the Maya, were the first to develop the area between 900 and 600 BC. The first structures were erected from 426 to 435 by **Great Sun Lord Quetzal Macaw**, who founded a dynasty that ruled Copán until its collapse in the Post-Classic period. Emblem glyphs identifying Copán have been found at a number of nearby sites, leading researchers to believe that the city controlled most of the area as early as AD 564. But it was **Smoke Jaguar** (628-695) who made Copán into a major military power and constructed the first great buildings in the city. **King 18 Rabbit** followed from 695-738. This king changed the focus of Copán, concentrating on the architecture and stelae in the city, rather than on war and conquest. He was a brilliant statesman and diplomat and mentored several noblemen, including Cauc Sky, whom he placed on the throne at Quiriguá. Cauc Sky showed his gratitude by capturing 18 Rabbit, torturing him and, eventually, beheading him. **Smoke Monkey**, the next to rule, reigned from 738-749, but he built nothing new. It is believed he was a puppet king placed on the throne by Cauc Sky. **Smoke Shell** (749-763) built the impressive hieroglyphic staircase, which displays the longest inscription of Maya hieroglyphics found to date. Smoke Shell's son, **Yax Pac**, took over the throne in 736 and the city went into decline shortly afterward.

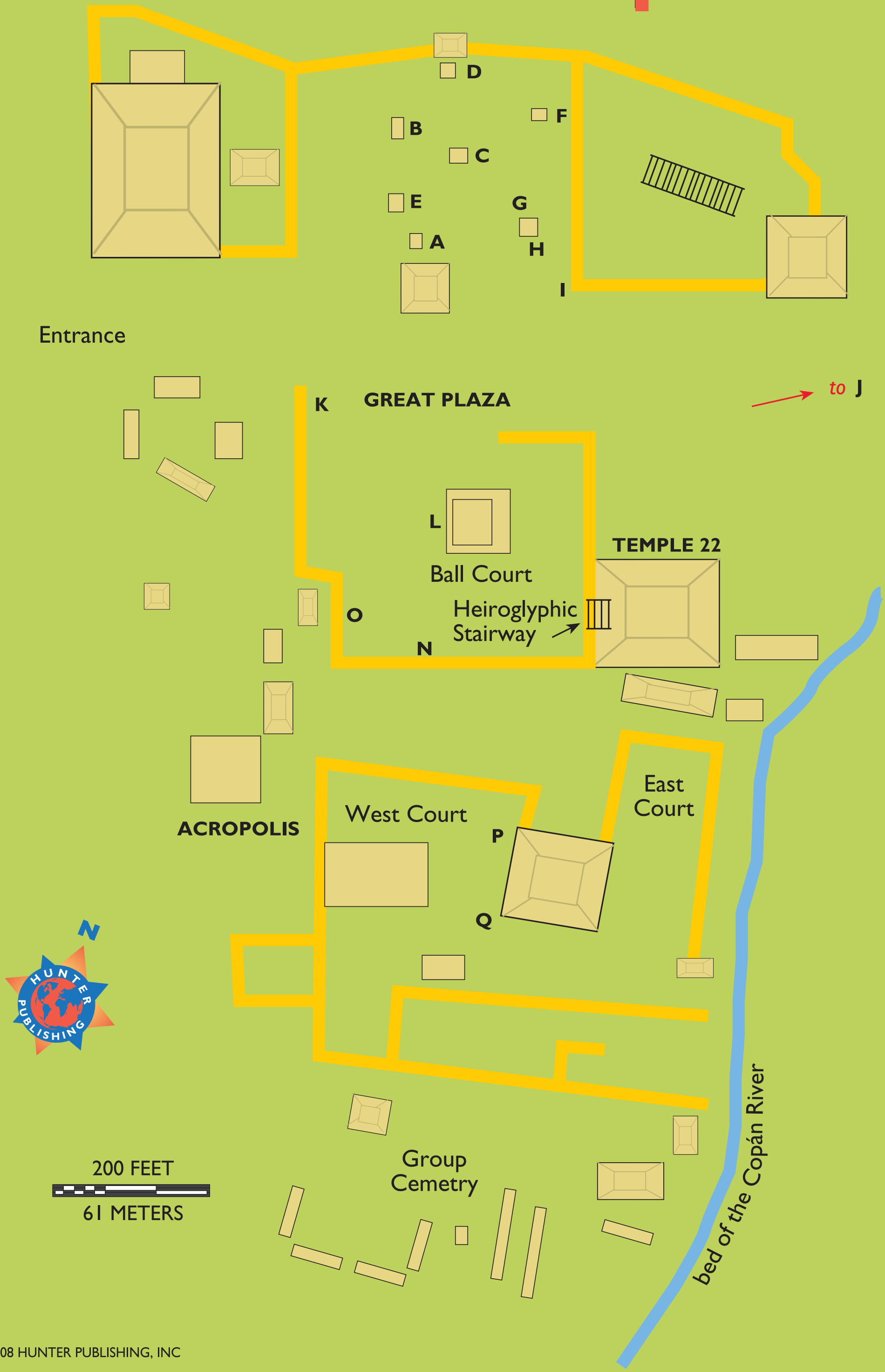
It is not known what brought about the downfall of Copán. Popular theories include massive starvation, a natural disaster or warfare decimating the entire population. The city was totally abandoned by the 9th century and Copán went unnoticed for several hundred years. The first mention of it was in 1576, during one of the Conquistador's visits to the area, when a tag-along member of the royal court of Philip II sent the king a description of the city. **Don Diego García de Palacios**' account of Copán is still considered one of the most comprehensive every written. But the city didn't really come into the spotlight until 1834, when **John Lloyd Stephens** and **Frederick Catherwood** visited the area and wrote about Copán in their famous travelogue. Stephens actually bought the lease to the ruins for US $50 in 1841, but serious work didn't take place until 1975 when Harvard University started a mapping project. In 1977, the Government of Honduras started their own excavations.

> GETTING HERE: *There are actually two Copáns: the village and the ruins. Both are called Copán Ruinas. The village is a half-mile west of the actual ruins. Most public transportation options drop you in the village, and you must walk along a pleasant walkway that leads through fields dotted with stelae to reach the ruins.*

EXPLORING THE RUINS

With over 4,500 mounds left to explore, only a fraction of Copán has been properly excavated. Most of the restored ruins are located in the Central Plaza, and the whole site takes about four hours to explore. You can walk along nature trails to visit the ruins.

Copán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East Court
West Court
P
ACROPOLIS
Q
N
HUNTER PUBLISHING
200 FEET
61 METERS
Group Cemetry
bed of the Copán River

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ACROPOLIS: The acropolis consists of the East Court (also called the Jaguar Court) and the West court. The most famous structure here is **Altar Q**, located at the base of Pyramid 16 in the West Court. Carved in AD 776, it appears to have been dedicated to Yax Pac, whose name appears on the front below a seated figure and next to the date July 2, AD 763. Below the altar is a small crypt with the remains of 16 jaguars that may have been sacrificed in a religious ritual. Behind Altar Q is the East Court and **Structure 18**, thought to be the tomb of Yax Pac. Unfortunately, looters got to the tomb before archeologists and not much remains. **Structure 22** here has elaborate carvings of human and animal heads. The corners of the temple are decorated with the long nose of Chaac, the Maya rain god. Above the doorway is a carving of a two-headed serpent thought to be the Great Cosmic Monster. Farther south of this building is **The Cemetery** (*El Cementerio*), named for the large number of burial tombs discovered here. Recent excavations indicate this was a royal residence for the family of Yax Pac.

GREAT PLAZA: The Great Plaza is reached along a shady lane starting out from the visitor's center. It houses the most important structures, including nine famous stelae, the Temple of the Inscriptions, the Hieroglyphic Court and a ball court. Because it has so much wide-open space within its boundaries, it is thought to have been used for public events and has enough space for up to 3,000 people. In the plaza's north end, seven stelae and 11 altars rise, while the south end has another set of vast steps overlooking the ball court and, to one side, the Hieroglyphic Stairway.

STELAE: Copán's greatest features are the stelae that display vivid carvings still intact after centuries of exposure to the elements. The most famous are the round 3-D stelae made of massive rectangular stones. These are unique, because almost all other stelae found in the Maya world are flat. Each side is carved with different symbols or glyphs and many also have portraits of famous kings (the majority feature 18 Rabbit).

The earliest stele, **Stele E**, is dedicated to Waterlily Jaguar, who reigned from AD 504-544. **Stele 6** was erected in AD 681 and its face is thought to

Stele © Toon Possemiers/Dreamstime

be that of Smoke Jaguar. His name and history also appears on **Stele J**. **Stele P** tells the story of Smoke Sky, or Smoke Serpent, who ascended the throne in AD 628 at the tender age of 15.

The most famous and most photographed stele is **Stele C**. The altar at its base is carved in the shape of a turtle and it has the face of 18 Rabbit staring out enigmatically at the surrounding buildings. **Stele A**, dating from 731 AD, also dedicated to 18 Rabbit, is the most weathered of all, with worn faces and 52 glyphs still visible. **Stele B** has the face of 18 Rabbit on both sides and looks vaguely Oriental. **Stele D** is perhaps the most interesting. On one side is the face of a very young 18 Rabbit. On the other side 18 Rabbit has grown a beard and long hair. The beard is a bit of an anomaly, since Maya generally did not grow facial hair.

During excavations it was discovered that almost all the stelae had some form of vault underneath them. The voids were filled with clay vessels, jade beads, fish and bird bones, and other artifacts. Various altars are scattered around the stelae, including the prominent **Sacrifice Stone**, which has a spherical shape and a small circular opening in the middle decorated with an ornate serpentine.

BALL COURT: The ball court is a typical construction that's found in almost every other Maya ruin. It is built in the shape of a thick I. In the middle are sloping walls, 23 feet wide (9.44 meters) and 31 inches (78 cm) high. Along the ends are slanting benches built for spectators. Both the floor and benches are covered with carvings. In the middle of the alley are three carved circles known as the "markers," used to put in the ball during a game. The court is 95 x 23 feet (30 x 9½ meters).

HIEROGLYPHIC COURT & STAIRCASE: On the left side of the Hieroglyphic Court is the famed **Hieroglyphic Staircase**, considered the most remarkable monument from the Classic period. It's made up of 63 stone steps and each block has been carved to form the longest glyph sequence in the Maya world. At the time of its discovery, the blocks were found tumbled together in a heap and it took archeologists many years of struggle to put the 2,200-glyph jigsaw back together. A complete interpretation is a long way away, but there are indications that it was built by Smoke Shell to commemorate Copán rulers One through 15. Archaeologist believe that the whole of Copán's history has been carved into the stone blocks. Beside the stairway a tunnel leads to the burial site of what is thought to be Smoke Shell's son. Discovered in June 1989, the tomb had a cache of painted pottery and carved jade objects.

TEMPLE OF THE INSCRIPTIONS: To the right of the staircase is the Temple of Inscriptions and its colossal staircase that leads to a plaza with a bird's-eye view of the ruins. At its base is **Stele N**, which features two worn faces thought to be Smoke Shell. This temple has not been restored and has trees growing out of its sides.

EXCAVATION TUNNELS: Original excavation tunnels used by archeologists are now open to the public. Located below Structures 16 and 17 in the East Plaza, these tunnels lead to some of the most startling discoveries at Copán. The Maya often buried their temples to preserve them and this is a prime example of that practice.

The **Tunnel of the Jaguars** (*El Túnel de los Jaguares*) is half a mile (.8 km) long, with many small niches for offerings alongside burial tombs. Archeologists date the tombs back to AD 540; this was one of the first tombs discovered here in 1834.

The **Rosalila Tunnel** (*El Túnel Rosalila*) leads to the temple found underneath Structure 16. Traces of red paint can still be seen and the carvings are remarkably intact. The Sun God mask is especially notable. The stucco edifice on this temple is considered the best preserved in the Maya world. For protection, everything is behind Plexiglas.

A separate admission is charged to enter the tunnels. The US $12 per person fee is quite steep, but both the temple and tombs are amazing. If you are claustrophobic, scared of the dark or affected by the damp, skip the tunnels.

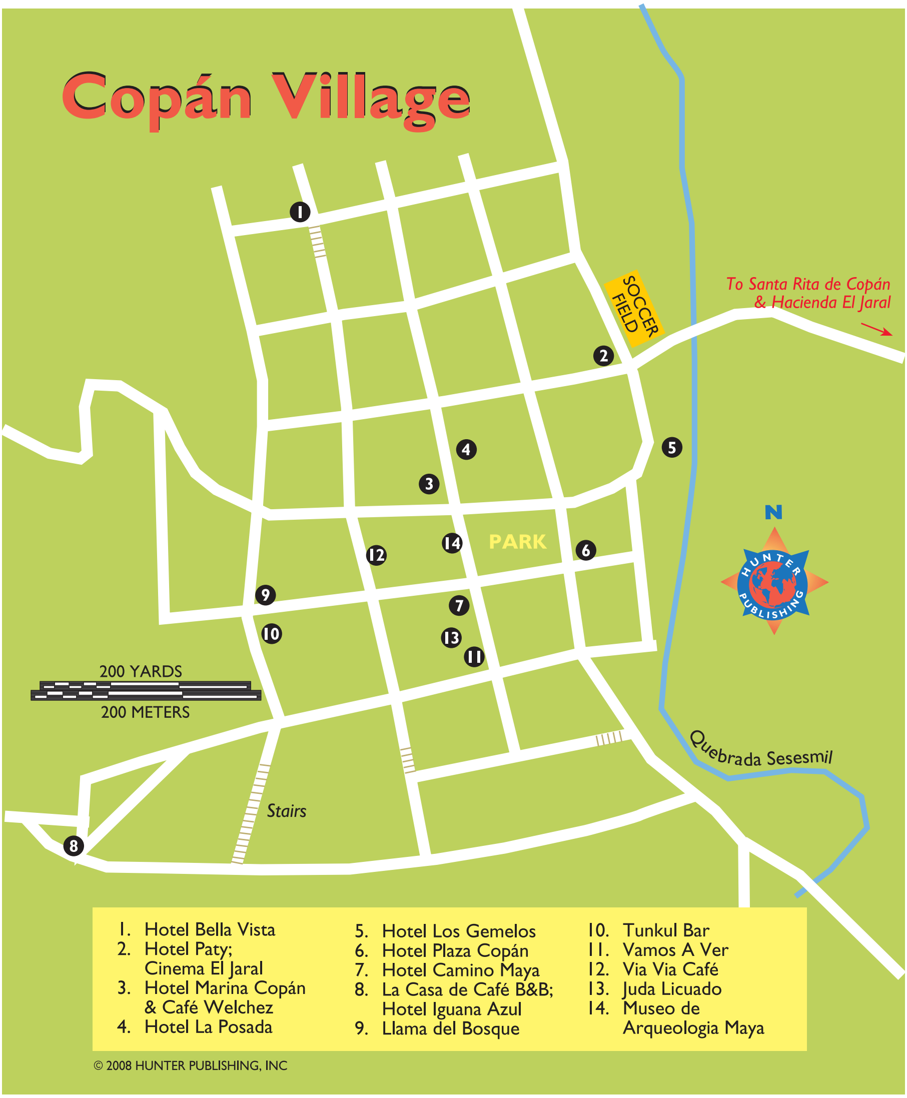
LAS SEPULTURAS: Las Sepulturas is a group of 40 residential complexes northeast of the Great Plaza. So far, 100 buildings with 200 rooms have been investigated. They are thought to have been used by royal wives and children as residences, because the structures used sophisticated masonry with corbel vaults usually reserved for nobility. Even more revealing were the trash heaps found alongside the vaults. They contained scraps of carbonized food, knives and shells dating from 900 BC to AD 450. **Structure 9N-82**, also known as the Scribe's Palace, had an beautifully sculptured bench carved in AD 781 and dedicated to an important scribe in the royal court of Yax Pac. Its outside walls are covered with 10 upright figures wearing official headdresses. The bench and carved walls are on display at the Regional Museum in the town of Copán Ruinas. Las Sepulturas is one mile (1.6 km) northeast of the main road.

COPÁN SCULPTURE MUSEUM

This museum was built by the Government of Honduras and is currently managed by the Instituto Hondureño de Antropología e Historiá (IHAH). The best of Copán's sculptures are housed here, including most of the original stelae (replicas are on the grounds). It is hoped the pieces will be preserved and protected from the elements in this dry, controlled environment. The museum has some exceptional pieces and is a fascinating supplement to the ruins. Especially effective is the giant, painted replica of the Rosalila Temple. The original Stele A and carved bat emblem of the city are other highlights. Entrance fee, US $5.

COPÁN RUINAS VILLAGE

The village of Copán Ruinas is a charming community laid out in a grid pattern with a central plaza at its middle. The pleasant plaza has a variety of shops and restaurants along its perimeter, but the big draw on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1. Hotel Bella Vista
2. Hotel Paty; Cinema El Jaral
3. Hotel Marina Copán & Café Welchez
4. Hotel La Posada
5. Hotel Los Gemelos
6. Hotel Plaza Copán
7. Hotel Camino Maya
8. La Casa de Café B&B; Hotel Iguana Azul
9. Llama del Bosque
10. Tunkul Bar
11. Vamos A Ver
12. Via Via Café
13. Juda Licuado
14. Museo de Arqueologia Maya
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the plaza is the fascinating **Archeology Museum** (Museo de Arqueologiá). It contains the original Stele B and sculpted bench from Las Sepulturas, as well as painted pottery, carved jade objects found in the tombs. A Maya calendar includes explanations of the codes used and there's also a history timeline showing the various rulers. Tumba del Brujo (Tomb of the Warlock) is the actual tomb of a shaman from the Plaza de los Jagueres dating back to AD 700. Open 8 am to noon and 1-4 pm, Monday-Saturday. Admission is US $2.

GETTING HERE & GETTING AROUND

This is a tour you can easily do on your own. Spend a night in Chiquimula and catch an early bus to El Florido at the Honduran border. Buses leave throughout the day. Plan to stay in Copán overnight since the last bus from the ruins back to border leaves at 5 pm. The Honduran border closes at 6 pm, meaning no one can come or go. Offering a bribe won't get the gate open.

As you enter Honduras, let the immigration official know you are going to the ruins and you will receive a special permit (US $1). You must return to Guatemala via the same route and your current visa will be good. Regular *colectivo* vans make the trip to Copán Ruinas village; they cost US $2 for the 45-minute ride. If there are no buses on the horizon, you can try to negotiate a ride with a pickup truck. They will charge more, but you can be dropped right at the ruins (as opposed to in the town).

Moneychangers will swamp you at the border, eager to change your dollars into Honduran lempiras. American dollars are accepted at the village and ruins.

COPÁN TOUR COMPANIES

A number of agencies offer trips to Copán from Antigua. Going with a group usually costs more, but it's certainly more convenient. Transportation to the ruins costs US $50 per person and overnight trips run between $150 and $250. The following have the best schedules and prices.

Monarca Travel, 6a Av Norte #6-A, ☎/fax 502/7-832-4305, monarcas@conexion.com.gt.

Aviatur Travel Agency, 5a Av Norte #33, Calle de Arco, ☎/fax 502/7-832-5067, aviatur@yahoo.com.mx.

Maya Ital Tour, Interior Hotel Posade Don Rodrigo, 5a Av Norte #19, ☎ 502/7-832-6502, fax 502/7-832-6162, mayaital@centramerica.com.

Some public buses run around Copán, but service is infrequent and you don't really need them since everything is in walking distance.

Plenty of buses go to the ruins if you don't feel like walking there. Taxis are also available and are inexpensive.

WHERE TO STAY

There are plenty of hotels from which to choose, ranging from luxury to budget. All are within walking distance of the central park, also known as Parque Centroamérica. Reservations are recommended during Easter, the August patron saint festivals and at Christmas. Otherwise, you can pick your hotel on the day.

HOTEL PRICE CHART

Prices are per person

$	under US $25
$$	US $26-50
$$$	US $51-85
$$$$	US $86-125
$$$$$	over US $125

Hotel Marina Copán, *northwest of central park, ☎ 504/651-4070, fax 504/651-4477, www.hotelmarinacopan.com, 40 rooms, $$$.* This hotel is named for the previous owner, Doña Marina Welchez, who turned her family home into a hotel in 1945. Of course, it has been renovated several times since then, but its colonial charm remains. There is a lovely tropical garden with a pool, spa, sauna and gym. Rooms are spacious, furnished with wooden furniture and local textiles and have the usual amenities, including mini-bars and air conditioning. The restaurant-bar has live music on the weekends and there is a small, well-equipped meeting room.

Hotel Camino Maya, *southwest of central park, ☎ 504/651-4518 or 651 4646, fax 504/651 4517, toll-free in the US 877/893-9131, www.caminomayahotel.com, 23 rooms, $$-$$$.* This is a posh hotel with reasonable prices. Amenities include a swimming pool, restaurant, laundry service, Internet service, a game room and conference center overlooking the river. Rooms have wrought iron furnishings, queen-size beds, mini-bars, hair dryers and a separate living room. The art in the lobby is worth a look.

Hacienda El Jaral, *Santa Rita de Copán, ☎ 504/656-7091, www.haciendaeljaral.com, 22 rooms, $$$.* This charming mountain resort, built in 1870 by Francisco Fiallos, is seven miles from the village. Rooms are located in cozy private bungalows and have a front terrace equipped with rocking chairs where you can enjoy the view and a back terrace with hammocks for afternoon siestas. Inside, the rooms have large beds, rustic furniture, satellite TV, hot water and air conditioning.

There's a bar, pool, store, boutique, cinema, gym and swimming pool. Nearby is a lagoon that is home to many birds, including the great white heron. The resort offers a number of activities, such as horseback riding, coffee plantation tours and nature walks.

La Casa de Cafe, B & B, *4 blocks from central park, ☎ 504/651-4620, fax 504/651-4623, www.todomundo.com/casadecafe, 10 rooms, $$.* La Casa de Café is a charming hotel with a lot of character. The rooms are tiny, but adorable, with wooden ceilings, antique fans and furniture. All offer incredible views of the mountains and valley. There is a good library and lovely garden with hammocks scattered about. The Honduran country style breakfast is accompanied by divine coffee.

Hotel Posada Real, *northwest of central park, ☎ 504/651-4480, fax 504/651-4497, www.posadarealdecopan.com, 80 rooms, $$$ (children under 12 are free).* This huge, family-style hotel offers a lot of activities and tours. The rooms are rather cramped and generic in décor, but they do get lots of sunlight and have nice ceramic tile floors. They are equipped with two double beds, air conditioning, hot water and cable TV.

Hotel Park Copán, *southeast of central park, ☎ 504/651-4039, 25 rooms, $$$.* Rooms in this pretty hotel overlook the central park and cathedral. They're roomy and come with a private bath, cable TV, comfortable double beds and air conditioning. There's also a lovely terrace, pool and restaurant. The staff is very helpful.

Hotel Paty, *by the soccer field, ☎ 504/651-4021, 21 rooms, $.* You'll find clean, comfortable rooms centered on a large enclosed courtyard at this pleasant budget hotel. The property is a half-mile outside of the town center, which makes it one of the more tranquil hotels available. Of course, it is also closer to the ruins. Rooms have private baths and overhead fans, but the showers offer only a delicate trickle of lukewarm water. No credit cards.

Hotel Bella Vista, *southwest of central park, ☎ 504/651-4502, fax 504/652-4657, 18 rooms, $.* Located on a hill overlooking the town, this hotel really has an incredible view. Rooms are quite spacious and comfortable, if a bit plain. The private baths don't come with a hot water supply. No credit cards.

Hotel Los Gemelos, *southeast of central park, ☎ 504/651-4077, 15 rooms, $.* Los Gemelos is popular with backpackers and has a cheery atmosphere. The family who runs the hotel is congenial. Rooms, centered around a flower garden, are big, clean and homey. The coffee is always fresh and the main bus stop is just outside the door. The one drawback is that there are no private rooms – it's two to a room unless you want to pay the double rate when alone. No credit cards.

Iguana Azul Hostel, *southwest of central park, ☎ 504/651-4620, 2 dormitories with 12 beds, 3 private rooms, $.* This old ranch house has been converted to a hostel with dormitory accommodations and shared bathrooms. The nice high ceilings give an airy feel. A lovely common room is filled with books and magazines, and there's even a pleasant garden. This is a great place to get information on sites and activities in the area. No credit cards.

La Posada, *a half-block north of Central Plaza, ☎ 504/651-4021, www.laposadacopan.com, 10 rooms, $.* This family run hotel has very simple, comfortable rooms surrounded by beautiful gardens that are filled with tropical flowers. La Posada is close to everything in town.

WHERE TO EAT

Honduras is not known for its cuisine. The dishes tend to be simple – grilled meat or chicken, rice, tortillas and beans. However, Copán does have a good selection of restaurants with varied menus – the result of having so many international visitors. All restaurants are within walking distance of the central park and most serve breakfast, lunch and dinner. None have phones, unless listed, and those without phones do not accept credit cards.

Tunkul Restaurant and Bar, *two blocks west of central park.* People come to enjoy the great music, exchange a book or browse the music library while munching on tasty vegetarian dishes. Giant burritos, soups, sandwiches and pastas are the standard – all are good. Meat eaters can order something cooked on the charcoal grill. The well-stocked bar has happy hour starting at 7 pm. US $2.50-4.

Llama de Bosque, *two blocks west of central park.* The specialty at this restaurant is the *baleadas*, a taco filled with eggs, beans and cream. Daily specials (*plato típico*) include roast chicken and grilled meats served with soup, rice and vegetables. The food is hearty and economical. The downside to this place is that it's a popular tour bus stop. US $1-4.

Vía, Vía Café, *two blocks west of central park, ☎ 504/651-4652.* This European-style café is actually part of a Belgian franchise popular in Europe. There's a replica of Altar Q behind the bar and a great selection of magazines and newspapers to read as you sip the best coffee in town. This is the gathering spot for all the international travelers, so it's a great place to network. The food is mostly vegetarian – salads, sandwiches, soups. US $2-5.

Vamos a Ver Café-Restaurant, *a half-block from the central park, ☎ 504/651-4627.* The restaurant's cozy patio is the perfect place to enjoy incredible homemade soups, freshly baked bread, fruit or vegetable salads and scrumptious desserts. Plus, there's a great selection of Dutch cheeses, teas and coffee, which makes a nice change from the usual fare. US $2-6.

Juda Licuados y Comidas, *1.5 blocks southwest of central park.* If you are craving fresh fruit drinks, fruit smoothies, fruit salads or great sandwiches, come here. Try the refreshing watermelon (*sandida*), pineapple (*piña*) and coconut juices. US $1-3.

Café Welchez, *Marina Copán Hotel just off the center square.* This restaurant serves sandwiches, salads, baked goods and local specialities like tamales. The second-floor Cigar Bar is a great place to enjoy an evening drink.

IPALA

Ipala is a sleepy little village full of *vaqueros* (cowboys) who come to town from the various *fincas* (farms) to kick up their heels. There isn't much here aside from a few shops, bars and hotels more suited to the locals than tourists. The main draw here is Ipala Volcano and the newly formed wilderness trail.

ADVENTURES ON FOOT

IPALA VOLCANO

At first glance Ipala Volcano seems rather mundane. It hasn't been active for many years, so there are no dramatic displays of smoke and lava. But this volcano is actually very rare and is the only one of its kind in Guatemala. In a setting so tranquil and pristine, it is almost otherworldly. Hidden from view, at the top, is a perfectly round, emerald green lagoon surrounded by cypress and pine trees. A variety of plants and animals live in the forests nearby. At 5,412 feet (1,650 meters), Ipala stands higher than any other volcano in the area and offers an incredible view from its peak. On its south side is a small vent called **Cerro Monterrico** (4,216 feet/1,285 meters). This spot gets so much wind that the trees grow bent. The more protected north side looks out on a virgin cloud forest filled with birds and rare orchids.

In 2001, the Guatemalan Congress declared the forest and crater-lagoon a protected area and began a reforestation project encouraging farmers, who stripped the base of the volcano for cattle ranching or corn fields, to plant either trees or coffee. That same year, a biologist from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) helped locals create a nature center and trail. The nature center is still being built, but the trail is complete. It takes about 45 minutes of moderate hiking to reach the top. The birdwatching is phenomenal both along the trail and at the lagoon. A guide is recommended and you can find several in the village of Ipala or in Agua Blanca, a small community just south of the volcano. Camping at the peak is permitted; bring your own equipment and supplies.

> GETTING HERE: *The village has bus service from Chiquimula, Jalapa and Esquipulas. You can hike to the volcano from town – its about six miles (9.65 km) – or negotiate with a taxi driver to take you out (about Q40). The road has been newly paved, so the ride is smooth. Adventuresome travelers may consider hitching a ride or take a local bus to the village of Agua Blanca, where the trail begins.*

ADVENTURES ON WATER

HOT SPRINGS

About 12 miles (19 km) out of town is **Poza de la Pila,** hot water springs formed by the mixing of water from Río San José and the Ipala Volcano.

> GETTING HERE: *To get here, you will have to either hire a taxi or try hitching a ride with a truck going that way. Ask locals to point you in the right direction.*

WHERE TO STAY & EAT

Agua Blanca has nothing in the way of accommodations or hotels. Ipala Village has a few *comedores* close to the main street serving really basic food for about Q15 per plate. The only semi-decent place to stay is **Hospedaje Ipala Real**, *Colonia El Maestro, ☎ 502/7-923-7107, 17 rooms, $$.* Rooms are incredibly basic and have semi-private bathrooms, occasional hot water and cable TV.

QUETZALTEPEQUE

Quetzaltepeque, a traditional colonial city, was home to the **Pocomames Maya**, the first settlers in the area. (The Pocomames ruins in Honduras date to 200 BC.) Today, the Pocomames are known for their beautiful weaving and ceramics. This area is just starting to open up to tourism and, unfortunately, there still aren't any hotels or restaurants. To explore this area you'll have to base yourself in Esquipulas.

ADVENTURES ON FOOT

QUETZALTEPEQUE VOLCANO

Known as **Cerro de Chiramay** (Chiramay Hill), this volcano is six miles (9.65 km) east of Quezaltepeque village. It rises to 6,243 feet (1,902 meters) and is covered with a dense subtropical pine forest. The trail to the top is almost non-existent, so this is a challenging trek. But you will be rewarded with an incredible view of the nearby Ipala and Suchitan volcanoes, as well as the valleys and mountains below.

> **NOTE:** *Do not* attempt to make this trek on your own. Hire a local guide in the village for about Q60-70 per person.

For a list of available guides, contact the Fundación Defensores de la Naturaleza, 7 Av 7-09, Zona 15, ☎ 502/ 2-440- 8138 or 502/2-369-0231, www.defensores.org.gt.

El Piedra de Compadres, The Stone of the Friends, is a strange stone formation on the mountain route from Quezaltepeque to Esquipulas and resembles two men hugging each other. According to legend, one of the ancient gods caught two male friends in the act of making love. He was so outraged that he turned them to stone immediately. They now lie one on top of the other for all eternity.

ESQUIPULAS

Esquipulas is 34 miles (64 km) southeast of Chiquimula in a valley filled with flowers. It is considered the most important religious shrine in Latin America. The main attraction – in fact, the only attraction – is the basilica, which dominates the entire landscape. Each year, thousands of people come from all over Mexico, Central and South America to visit the famous **Icon de el Cristo Negro** (Black Christ).

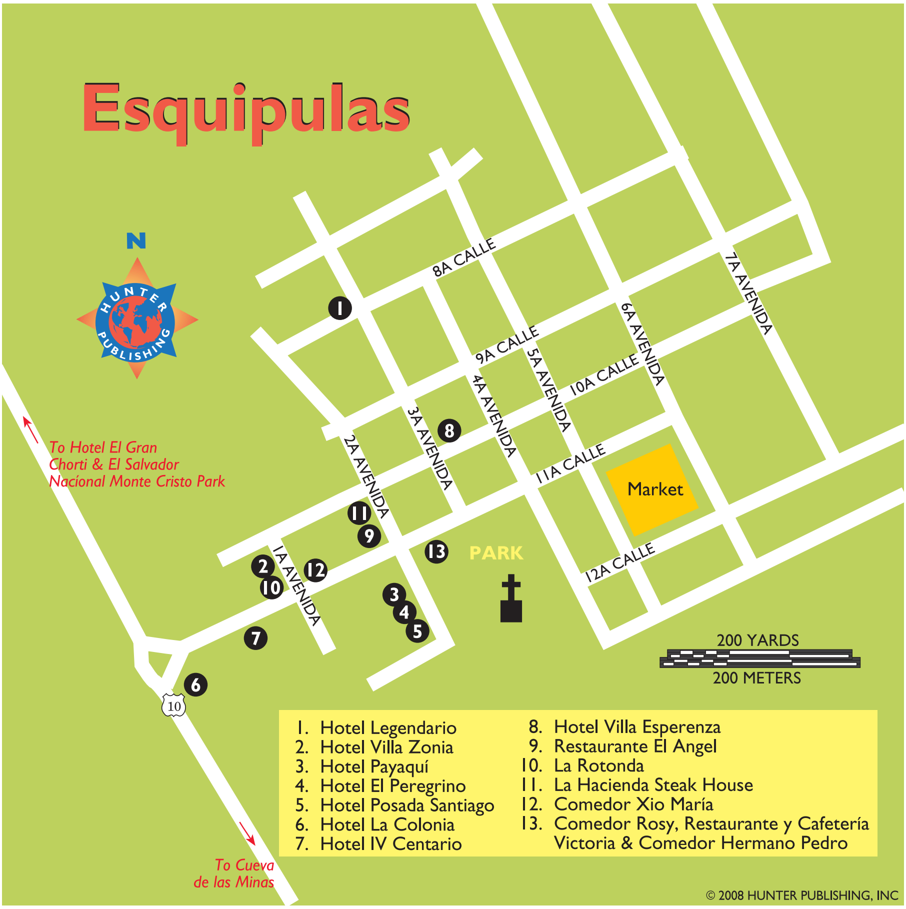
Road leading into Esquipulas

Esquipulas has been known as the **City of Peace** since 1986, when several peace agreements were signed here between Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua. This led to the signing of the 1996 Guatemalan Peace Accords that signaled the end of the civil war.

There are a number of excellent hotels and restaurants and, as long as you don't arrive during the Feast of Cristo Negro on January 1-14 or during Easter, you won't need a reservation.

HISTORY

Local folklore tells of the ancient **Maya** coming to this mountain valley, although there is no evidence of Maya ruins in the area. **Franciscan monks** and the **Dominican Brothers** arrived during the 16th century and built the first church. In 1595, they commissioned the famous sculptor Quirio Cataño to carve a statue of Christ for the new church. Cataño worked with a dark balsam wood and immediately the Maya began worshipping the statue because it was in their image and it was beautiful. This is perhaps one of the best examples seen of the blend of the pagan Maya beliefs with Catholicism.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2. Hotel Villa Zonia
3. Hotel Payaquí
4. Hotel El Peregrino
5. Hotel Posada Santiago
6. Hotel La Colonia
7. Hotel IV Centario
8. Hotel Villa Esperenza
9. Restaurante El Angel
10. La Rotonda
11. La Hacienda Steak House
12. Comedor Xio María
13. Comedor Rosy, Restaurante y Cafetería Victoria & Comedor Hermano Pedro

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In 1737, **Pardo de Figueroa**, Archbishop of Guatemala, was cured of a chronic ailment on a visit to Esquipulas. He declared the site sacred and ordered a new cathedral be built. Work began promptly and the new church, just one mile (1.6 km) from the original, was finished in 1758. Christian pilgrims began visiting the church shortly afterwards and continue to this day. The four white domes of the basilica have become the symbol of Esquipulas. At night, the church is lit up and provides a dramatic backdrop to the city.

SIGHTSEEING

Despite its importance, the basilica is pretty plain – it has neither fine carving, an elaborate ceiling or stained glass windows. But what it lacks in décor it makes up for in atmosphere. Inside, the floor is ablaze with candles lit by visitors who kneel to pray amid clouds of smoke and incense. In the background you'll hear organ music and devotees singing. Outside, families in their native costume gather to be photographed on the steps. Many wait for hours in line to visit the Black Christ, now behind a glass wall. During the Feast of the Black Christ, devotees climb steps on their knees.

Esquipulas basilica

Surrounding the basilica are vendors selling beautiful candles alongside garish religious souvenirs. The nearby streets are packed with hotels and restaurants packed with people who look for fun after their visit to the icon. The atmosphere is a heady mix of a carnival and religion.

ADVENTURES ON FOOT

CUEVA DE LAS MINAS

Located just outside of town behind the cemetery is the tourist center for the "Cave of the Mines." This small cave is located beside Río El Milagro (River of Miracles) and many locals come here to light candles after being blessed. There's a picnic area and swimming spot (locals believe the waters have miraculous healing powers).

ARE YOU A SINNER?

Legend has it that if you have a pure, unblemished soul you will emerge from the cave unsoiled. Since the cave walls are covered with black soot and only 164 feet (49 meters) wide with a small opening, this is an almost impossible task. But do give it a try and see how much of a sinner you are.

GETTING HERE: *To reach the caves, take the main road to the Honduras border; the caves are about a quarter-mile (.4 km) south of the town. Open 6:30 am-4 pm. Admission is Q5.*

MONTECRISTO TRI-NATIONAL PARK

Parque Nacional Montecristo-El Trifunio borders Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras and is one of the few remaining cloud forests in the area. A humid subtropical forest, it receives over 80 inches (203 cm) of rain annually and sits at 7,900 feet (2,407 meters) above sea level. Its 4,800 acres are filled with pine, cypress, oak and laurel trees, 350 species of birds, 500 species of butterflies and 280 species of animals. It is a refuge for many endangered species, including a rare spider monkey, two-fingered anteater, puma, agouti, toucan, striped owl and the shy quetzal bird.

The trees in Montecristo, which reach heights of 98 feet (29 meters) and upward, are covered with creepers and lichens that create a dense canopy over a forest floor littered with rare tropical orchids and moss. At the park's center is **Cerro Montecristo peak**. At 4,652 feet (1,417 meters), this is the tallest peak in the region. The rugged terrain, steep canyons and dense trails make the park perfect for combining rigorous hiking, trekking, birdwatching or mountain climbing. The summit route, the **Punto Trifinio Trail**, takes three hours to reach the top of

Cerro Montecristo. The park also encompasses part of **El Merendón** mountain range.

Hire a guide, since the trails branch off in several directions and it's very easy to get lost – permanently.

> GETTING HERE: *Be patient while planning this trip. Although 58% of the park is in Guatemala, access is through the small town of Metapán in El Salvador, which has trails, guides and a visitor center. Nothing has been developed on the Guatemalan-Honduran side of the park, so few Guatemalan tour agencies come here. There is, however, regular bus service between Esquipulas and Anguiatú, El Salvador. You can also negotiate a taxi to the border (actually, the taxi drivers will approach you first). A ride should cost around Q200. You will take a bus from Anguiatú to Metapán, where you can arrange transportation at the central market or at Hotel San José. You must first get permission from the Ministerio de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales MARN (Parks and Wildlife Service) Parque Nacional Montecristo, Dirección General de Patrimonio Natural, Km 5.5 Carretera a Nueva San Salvador, San Salvador, ☎ 503/2-267-6276, fax 502/2-267-6259, www.marn.gob.sv. Speaking Spanish will help with working out details.*

MONTECRISTO TOUR COMPANIES

Tours can be booked through an agency in El Salvador: **SalvaNatura**, 33 Av Sur #640, Colonia Flor Blanca, San Salvador, El Salvador, ☎ 503/279-1515, fax 503/279-0220, www.salvanatura.org. Costs will depend on the activities you choose and the length of your visit.

Campers may enjoy staying at the campground (bring your own supplies) in the park. Don't try to camp anywhere other than the designated campgrounds – you will be severely reprimanded and escorted out of the park. There's a small overpriced restaurant (with bad food) and a recreation center. Park entrance is US $1. Bring warm clothing and sturdy footwear.

WHERE TO STAY

Most hotels in Esquipulas lack character. The more amenities there are, the more generic your room will be. Unless you can't live without air conditioning and cable TV, you will get more value staying at one of the budget hotels. The more expensive hotels don't offer much for the high prices.

HOTEL PRICE CHART

Prices are per person

$	under US $25
$$	US $26-50
$$$	US $51-85
$$$$	US $86-125
$$$$$	over US $125

Hotel el Gran Chorti, *Entrada a Esquipulas, Km 22, ☎ 502/7-943-1148, fax 502/7-943-1551, 20 rooms ($$$), 20 suites ($$$$$).* A well-decorated lobby complete with glossy marble floor greets you as you enter this elegant hotel. A gigantic pool is surrounded by a welcoming deck and there's a tropical garden and nice restaurant. Rooms have double beds, air conditioning, satellite TV, hot water and small balconies that overlook the town. Suites have the same amenities and can sleep up to eight. Unfortunately, the décor in both is rather generic and the prices are high.

Hotel Legendario, *3a Av and 8a Calle, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-943-1824, fax 502/7-943-1022, 40 rooms, $$-$$$.* The outside of this hotel resembles an office building or shopping mall. Inside, however, it's much better. Comfortable rooms open into a lovely courtyard and garden with a pool. The rooms have very little personality, but do get lots of sunlight and have air conditioning, cable TV, and private baths.

Hotel Payaqui, *2a Av 11-56, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-943-2025, fax 502/7-943-1371, 55 rooms, $$-$$$.* This hotel is located right beside the basilica so it gets filled up very quickly. The oversize rooms have private baths, two double beds and a refrigerator, but nothing special in the way of décor. In the lobby, a huge swimming pool connects to a restaurant area. Both are always full, and the noise can be deafening.

Hotel Posada Santiago, *2a Av 11-56, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-943-1316, 15 rooms, $$.* Also beside the basilica, this small hotel has tiny rooms decorated with local furnishings. Each has a small balcony that opens onto the square, and it can get quite noisy. Downstairs is a nice restaurant and bar.

Hotel IV Centenario, *11 Calle 0-18, Zona 1 Col. Quirio Cataño, ☎ 502/7-943-1751, fax 502/943-1752, 31 rooms, $.* Two blocks from the basilica, this hotel offers rooms furnished with double beds, nice furniture, cable TV and private baths. There is a pool and Jacuzzi in the main lobby, along with a children's game room. The restaurant is overpriced, but the food is good.

Hotel Villa Zonia, *10a Calle 1-84, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-943-1133, 15 rooms, $.* Charming Hotel Villa Zonia is the best budget deal in town. The lobby has a lovely wooden staircase that leads to sunny rooms nicely decorated with wooden furniture and local textiles. All rooms have private baths and cable TV. The center of town is a 10-minute walk away.

Hotel El Peregrino, *2a Av 11-94, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-943-1054, fax 502/7-943-1474, 33 rooms, $-$$.* The original hotel is located on the southwest corner of the park. It has small, clean basic rooms with private baths. Behind that building is the new addition, where rooms have air conditioning, two double beds, cable TV and much larger bathrooms. The front rooms at this two-level hotel fill up quicker than those at the back, but inquire when checking in; they will try to rent the more expensive back rooms first.

Hotel Villa Esperenza, *3a Av 10-26, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-943-0281, 19 rooms, $.* Set above the local pharmacy, this quaint hotel is just steps from the basilica but it manages to remain tranquil. Lovely flowers and vines cover the outside and there are plants inside the rooms. Rooms are basic with hot water, overhead fans and private baths.

Hotel La Colonia, *2a Av, by main highway, no phone, 6 rooms, $.* This is the best bargain in town. The owners live upstairs in their house and have converted their basement into a small six-room hotel. There are three single beds in each room, cable TV and a nice-sized bathroom with hot water. It's 15 mins from town, and is much quieter than most budget hotels.

WHERE TO EAT

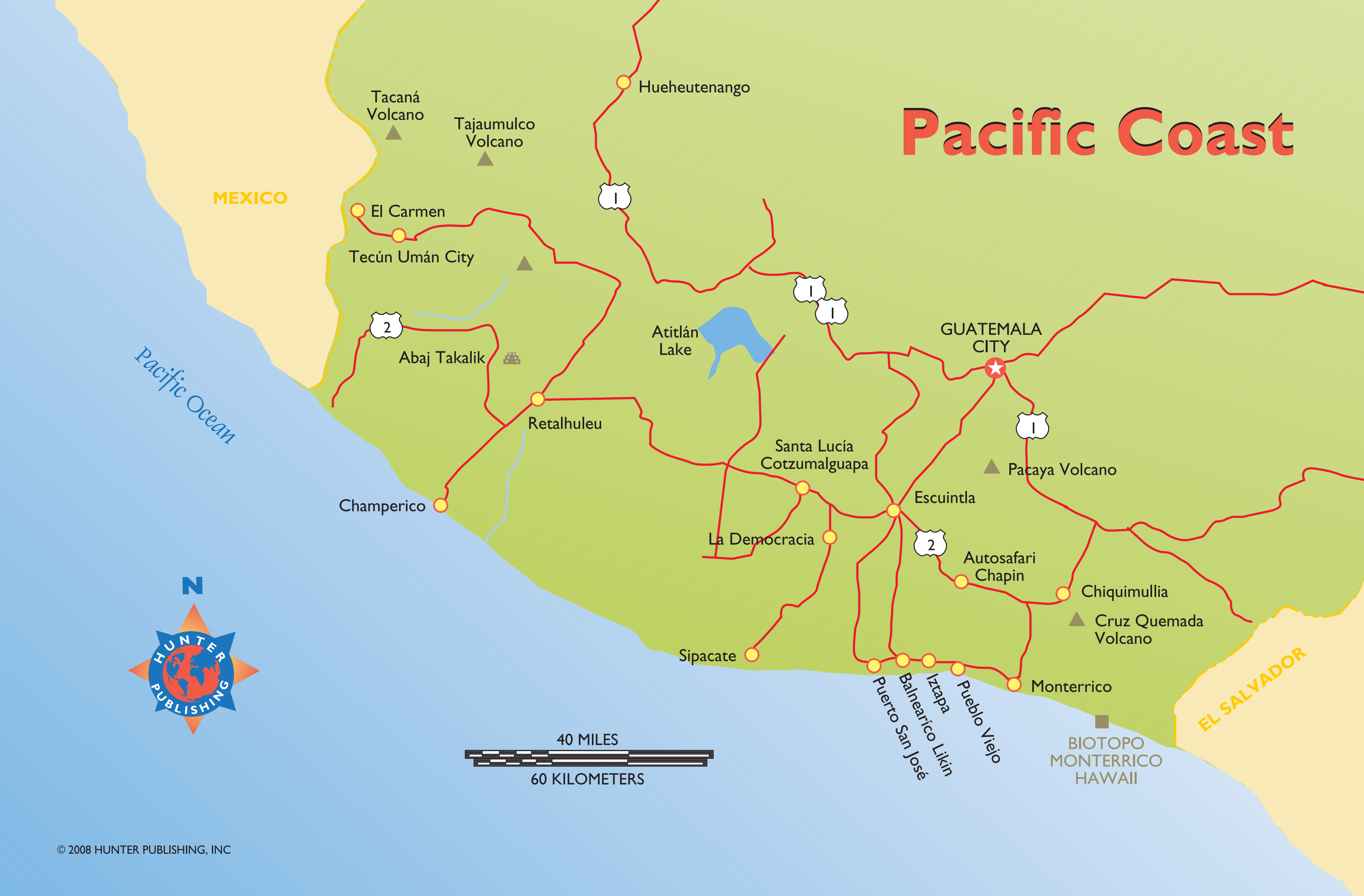
Esquipulas has lots of restaurants. Generally, they are more expensive than their counterparts elsewhere in the country. A host of low-budget restaurants at the north end of the park serve simple dishes such as tacos, sandwiches and daily specials. **Comedor Rosy** is among the best, offering meals at Q14. **Restaurante y Cafeteria Victoria** and **Comedor Hermano Pedro** are in the same area and have a bit more atmosphere. Both offer soups, roast chicken, tacos and daily specials for about Q20 per plate. No credit cards are accepted.

La Rotunda, *11a Calle.* La Rotunda is easy to spot. It's a circular building just across from the bus station. You sit at a pleasant open-air counter and pick from a simple menu that offers pizza, pasta and burgers. The best deal is the daily special, which includes soup, a main course, rice, vegetables, dessert and a drink, all for Q30.

Comedor XioMaría, *11a Calle, just across from La Rotunda.* It offers a daily special, along with tacos, sandwiches and tamales. Try one of the great fresh fruit juices here. Q15-20.

Restaurante El Angel, *11a Calle.* This is the town's Chinese food restaurant serving the usual chow mein, egg rolls, fried rice and other dishes. Prices are higher here than in some other places, but the portions are huge. Q45-75.

Hacienda Steak House, *2 Av and 10 C.* Hacienda's is the poshest place in town. It has a large open-air terrace, smart tables, pleasing décor and a well-stocked bar. The porterhouse is excellent, as are the ribs and other choice cuts. Q70-100.


Pacific Coast
Hueheutenango
Tacaná Volcano
Tajaumulco Volcano
MEXICO
El Carmen
Tecún Umán City
1
1
1
Atitlán Lake
GUATEMALA CITY
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2
Abaj Takalik
Retalhuleu
Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa
Pacaya Volcano
Escuintla
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Sipacate
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Pueblo Viejo
Monterrico
BIOTOPO MONTERRICO HAWAII
EL SALVADOR
40 MILES
60 KILOMETERS

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Pacific Coast

Guatemala's Pacific Coast stretches 155 miles (250 km) and is bordered on the north by Mexico and on the southeast by El Salvador. It is best known for its volcanic black sand beaches and mangroves in the departments of **Retalhuleu**, **Escuintla** and **Santa Rosa**. This area is much different from the highlands, with an extremely hot and humid climate. The rich volcanic soil has made the area very fertile and it has the most farms of any region in Guatemala.

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La Boca Costa (Mouth of the Coast) are the foothill of the Pacific Slope that start from the Western Highlands and move down into the **La Costa** (Pacific Coast Lowlands). This is a lush region of deciduous and evergreen rainforest with rivers and streams that meander among four volcanoes. It is famous for its diverse bird populations as many migrating birds make this area their home in the winter months.

The Pacific Coast Lowlands consist of a narrow 25-mile (40-km) strip of land bordered by the ocean and La Boca Costa. The climate is warmer and sunnier than in the highlands and the landscape is diverse. Rivers, lakes, streams, canals and estuaries ply the land, but the largest area is covered by mangrove swamp. Thousands of migrating shorebirds, seabirds and waterfowl come to nest in La Costa Sur.

HISTORY

This area was one of the very first to be settled in Guatemala, and it was done so by a number of independent tribes from northern Mexico. The very first were the **Olmecs**. They were followed by the **Ocòs** and **Iztapa**, who lived in small villages working in stone and pottery as far back as 1500 BC. Between AD 400 and 900, the **Pipil** invaded the entire coastland, building half a dozen sites and commencing the production of cacao. By the late Postclassic period, the **Quiché**, **Tzutukil** and **Cakchiqule** tribes had also migrated to the area. Unfortunately, many of the original tribal sites have been lost to the jungle or plowed over to make way for sugarcane plantations.

Pedro Alvarado visited this area in 1524 on his way to the highlands, but did not remain long. A handful of Franciscan monks tried to convert the Pipil, but were unsuccessful. The virulent mosquitoes and malaria killed most of the monks and for a while the area was forgotten. In the late 17th century a few settlers came to grow cacao, indigo dye and cattle ranch. But it wasn't until the 1820s that huge plantations of coffee, rubber, banana and sugarcane were planted along the Boca Costa. In order to find workers for their *fincas*, the rich landowners petitioned the government to pass a law that forced all Indians to work four years on a *finca*. This drew a massive influx of people, but few remained after their four-year term was complete. In the early 1880s a railway to Guatemala City and a huge port were built. Puerto San José became *the* Pacific Coast port used by everyone as far north as Mexico and south to El Salvador.

Cotton plant, ready for harvest

The area remains an agricultural area. Coffee, sugarcane, cardamom, cotton, bananas and cattle are the main crops, and the *fincas*, which stretch for miles, are still in operation, this time with a permanent *Ladin*o workforce. The Highland Maya also work here as migrant field workers.

Many of the coastal towns operate as weekend getaways for affluent Guatemalans. Perhaps it is a combination of the heat, humidity and lack of tourists that make parts of the pacific region squalid.

GETTING HERE & GETTING AROUND

A fast highway in excellent shape runs from Guatemala City all the way to the Mexican border. **Carrterra al Pacificio**, CA-2, can take you from the Pacific Coast to Guatemala City in less than four hours. It is a highway notorious for its dreadful accidents, so drive it with care. Regular bus service departs for Retalhuleu, making it the easiest department to get to. The other departments take several transfers at different villages.

Most of the villages are so tiny that you won't need to take buses to get around. The coastal villages use boats for travel.

Department of Santa Rosa

Jumaytepeque volcano

The department of Santa Rosa's colder and more northern areas are part of the Sierra Madre mountain range, topping out at 5,249 feet (1,600 meters). As you head south, the climate warms up as the land drops to meet the Pacific Ocean. The department is located over what was a volcanic range and is covered with rich volcanic ash. It has four major volcanoes – **Tecuamburro** (6,381 feet/1.945 meters), **Jumaytepeque** (5,954 feet/1,815 meters), **Cruz Quemada** (5,545 feet/1,690 meters) and **Cerro Redondo** (4,002 feet/1,220 meters). Between them extensive valleys and plains planted with coffee, citrus fruit and cardamom sit alongside dairy and cattle ranches as the land extends down to the water.

Santa Rosa doesn't have a lot of tourism and it's two biggest attractions are the volcanoes and the 6,918-acre (2,800-hectare) Monterrico-Hawaii Mangrove Reserve, a sanctuary for marine ocean turtles and migrating birds.

HISTORY

Santa Rosa appears to have been settled in AD 100 by the Xinca and Pipil. The **Xinca**, the largest tribe, extended as far east as Jalapa. Shortly after AD 900, the **Pipil** made an appearance in the area and their language (a dialect of Nahua) became the second language. The Xinca kingdom flourished until 1526 when **Alvarado** arrived, meeting with a fierce tribe of warriors who refused to be ruled by the Spanish. Alvarado did leave them in peace, but over the next 33 years later Catholic priests conquered the tribe. In 1570, the area was officially settled with the creation of a tiny village **Nuestra Señora de los Dolores o Candelaria de los Esclavos** (Our Lady of Pain/Candlemas of the Slaves). To open the interior and provide transportation across the huge Río de los Esclavos (River of Slaves), the Puente de los Esclavos (Bridge of Slaves) was started in 1573 and finished in 1592. The department was already a prosperous agricultural and commercial center, and the addition of the bridge elevated it to serve as the main delivery route for tobacco crops from Honduras and El Salvador. Prosperity brought an influx of Spanish and the population gradually changed from Maya to *Ladino*. Today, only two percent of the population is Maya.

The department remained fairly prosperous until the mid-19th century. In 1848, the new Guatemalan government decided to break up the territory into three districts: Jutiapa, Santa Rosa and Jalapa. Santa Rosa was officially recognized in 1852. During this time the country's economy became focused on coffee and bananas and Jalapa grew in importance as an economic center, connected by railroad to Puerto Barrios and the United Fruit Company. Santa Rosa lost its standing. As a result, huge tracks of land were developed into large plantations and Indians were conscripted to work on these plantations as virtual slaves.

There is not much tourism in this department and parts of Santa Rosa are quite poor. The area is famous for its pottery, hats and brooms woven from palm leaves, wood carvings, leather goods and chairs.

LEGEND OF PUENTE DE LOS ESCLAVOS

Legend has it that during the construction of the bridge exhausted slaves made a pact with the Devil: their souls in exchange for a completed bridge. The bridge was completed and the Devil went to collect, but during the night one of the slaves had regretted his actions and challenged the Devil using a blessed crucifix as his weapon. The Devil crumbled and could not collect his souls. In a fit of rage, he kicked the bridge so hard that one of the stones fell to the ground. The bridge has been repaired many times since then and that same stone always falls out.

ADVENTURES IN NATURE

LA BOCA COSTA

Pacific parakeet

La Boca Costa has a warm sunny climate with a dry season between November and May and a humid season from June to October. At 5,000 feet (1,500 meters), it offers a mixed deciduous forest that many birds use as their nesting grounds. The climate and vegetation make this a perfect birding area. Over 380 birds within 58 families have been identified in the region, including the azure-rumped tanager, rufous saberwing, maroon-chested ground-dove and the Pacific parakeet. Warm lowland air and cool highland air meet to create rising thermals for soaring raptors such as the great black hawk, grey hawk, black-and-white hawk-eagle and grey-headed kite.

BIRDING TOUR COMPANIES

You can make arrangement on your own or take a tour offered by one of several agencies, including:

Cayaya Birding, PO Box 098 Periférico, Guatemala City, ☎ 502/5-308-5160, fax 502/2-433-0544. This company is owned and operated by Knut Eisermann and Claudia Avendaño, authors of the *Annotated Checklist of the Birds of Guatemala.*

ReuXtreme, 4ta Calle 4-23, Zone 1, inside Hostal Santa Maria, Retalhuleu, ☎ 502/5-202-8180, www.reuxtreme.com. This local agency can arrange speciality bird tours in the area.

VOLCANO ADVENTURES

CRUZ QUEMADA VOLCANO

This volcano reaches a height of 5,545 feet (1,690 meters) and is no longer active. At its foot is the small village of Santa María Ixhuatán, a community consisting largely of coffee plantations that extend up the volcano. You have to hike midway up the volcano before reaching the giant trees of the rainforest. If the day is clear, you will be able to see over the blanket of coffee plantations as far as the coast. At the summit are radio transmission towers. This volcano is part of the Cerro La Consulta mountain range and the trail is a medium challenge that takes up to three hours to complete. It is best to hire a guide in the village of Santa María Ixhuatán; ask at the taxi stand. Birdwatching is excellent along the trails.

GETTING HERE: *There are no direct routes to Santa María Ixhuatán. You will need to take a bus from Guatemala City to Barberena or Aldea los Esclavos and transfer to a local bus for another three miles. From the village, it's a 8½-mile (12-km) hike to the summit.*

TECUAMBURRO VOLCANO

Tecuamburro is actually a dormant volcanic complex composed of several peaks, including Cerro La Soledad (Hill of Solitude), 6,053 feet/1,845 meters; Cerro Peña Blanca (Hill White Rock), 6,069 feet/1,850 meters; and Cerro de Miraflores, 6,381 feet/1,945 meters. Cerro Peña Blanca, covered in small openings emitting smoke and sulfur, offers the most interesting climb. This peak is covered with beautiful rainforest made up of giant cypress and pine trees. The forest on all three peaks is so thick that views are scarce until you reach the top. Once above the trees you will be able to see coffee plantations and Cruz Quemada Volcano. Because of the thick vegetation on this volcano trail you should wear pants to protect your legs. The ascent takes between two to three hours. You can ask in Aldea Los Esclavos or in the village of Pueblo Nuevo Viñas for a guide.

Laguna de Ixpaco

Laguna de Ixpaco is a lagoon at the base of Tecuamburro Volcano. It is actually a volcanic depression connected to an underground river. The water is a ghostly yellow-green due to the high levels of sulfur and, when levels are high, it can turn to milky-white. Prolonged exposure to the fumes coming off the water can be harmful; people with breathing problems should probably not visit. Nearby are some sulfur hot springs that the locals like to visit.

The exact geographical center between North America and South America is found in the capital city of Cuilapa. A monument in the center of town marks the spot.

GETTING HERE: *Tecuamburro is in Pueblo Nuevo Viñas. Catch a bus to Cuilapa, transfer to a bus heading toward Aldea los Esclavos and, at the junction, the bus will head south to Chiquimulilla. Check before you get on; otherwise, get off at the junction and wait for a bus heading south. It's another 10 miles (16 km) to the village of Tecuamburro. Occasionally, the bus does not make it this far, especially after it rains and the dirt road turns to mud. There's a small parking lot at the foot of the volcano.*

ADVENTURES ON WATER

RÍO LOS ESCLAVOS

© Jason Hutchens

Río Los Esclavos runs down the middle of Santa Rosa cutting between Cruz Quemada and Tecuamburro volcanoes and offering numerous hot springs en route. In some places the water reaches 90° F (32° C). Scientists used the exposed volcanic rock along the banks of Río Los Esclavos to categorize the geographical history of the region. This river is becoming popular for **whitewater rafting** because of its five-mile (eight-km) canyon filled with numerous Class III and Class IV rapids, with colorful names such as Crazy Mouse (*Ratón Loco*). Several companies offer day tours along the river.

RÍO LOS ESCLAVOS TOUR COMPANY

Maya Expeditions, 5 Calle "A" 14-07, Zona 10, Guatemala City, ☎ 502/2-363-4955, fax 502/2-368-1248, www.mayaexpeditions.com, offers two exciting whitewater trips along this mighty river. This day-trip departs from Guatemala City or Antigua. The rafting starts at the village of Barbarena before heading down through the canyon to a 200-foot (61-meter) waterfall. There are a number of portages, so you'll need to be in good physical condition. The trip finishes just before the Esclavos Dam project. Offered June through November. See their website for more information.

WHERE TO STAY & EAT

There isn't much in the way of hotels in this area. The main town is Aldea los Esclavos. You might try the **Turicentro Los Esclavos**, *Aldea los Esclavos,* ☎ *502/5-394-6693, fax 502/7-885-5158.* This pleasant hotel has average-size rooms decorated with bright colors and wooden furniture. All have air conditioning (a must in this part of the country), hot water, cable TV and two double beds. There is a decent-sized pool and a restaurant on site.

MONTERRICO VILLAGE

Monterrico is a small undeveloped village along the coast. A number of comfortable hotels set along its main unpaved road are perfect spots for relaxing. The beaches have black volcanic sand. Watch for the riptides. On the north side of the village is a series of mangrove canals and the Monterrico-Hawaii Mangrove Reserve.

Boats, Monterrico

GETTING HERE & GETTING AROUND

There is no direct route to Monterrico. If you are coming from Lake Atitlán, Antigua or Guatemala City, catch a tourist shuttle from Antigua. They leave every Saturday at 8 am and cost US $12. Reservations are recommended, as many locals use this service for day-trips to the beach. The shuttle back is US$10 per person. See page 101 for a list of shuttle services.

By bus, take the direct line from Guatemala City to the village of La Avellana, where you can hop on a ferry across the Chiquimulilla Canal to Monterrico. From Antigua, Lake Atitlán or Quetzaltenango, take a bus to Escuintla, transfer to another bus in Taxisco and then switch again to a local bus heading to La Avellana village. You can also reach Monterrico through the port of Iztapa in the department of Escuintla. You cross Río María Linda by ferry to Pueblo Viejo and transfer to a bus that travels along a dirt road to Monterrico.

In Monterrico, plenty of small motorboats offer tours of the reserve. You can also rent canoes for exploring.

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Monterrico's black sand and crashing surf

■ ADVENTURES ON WATER

MONTERRICO-HAWAII BIOTÓPO

Monterrico Natural Reserve and the Hawaii National Park are two combined protected zones along the Pacific Coast. Both reserves have subtropical ecosystems with estuaries of saline water, lagoons and mangrove swamps covering 6,918 acres (28 square km). The man-

© www.Monterrico-Guatemala.com

groves here are nesting grounds to over 110 resident and migratory birds, as well as three species of marine turtles. The region offers a great variety of fish and crustaceans, and birding is excellent.

The beautiful **Chiquimulilla Canal** was built in 1895 in order to navigate through the mangroves, lakes and lagoons that run parallel to Boca Costa. It's possible to travel the entire 55 miles (90 km) that run through the reserve, but the water is partially covered with a reed called "tul," which can make paddling difficult. The plus side is that this reed creates a shelter for a number of waterfowl, so birding is quite incredible. You can rent canoes or hire a boat to explore the many lagoons close by. Flora includes mangrove trees, bulrushes, white water lilies, bromeliads, fruit and timber trees, and several species of iguanas are found here.

Palmilla Lagoon is quite close to the village, though still in the reserve. It serves as a primary breeding grounds for the brown pelican, which favors its mangroves and crustacean- and fish-filled waters. Some of the birds you will spot include the great blue heron, great white heron, common egret, green-backed heron, roseate spoonbill, snowy egret, tricolor heron, white ibis, Chokoloskee chicken, wood stork, white-breasted chachalaca, pygmy kingfisher, brown pelican and the collared plover.

CECON-USAC (Centro Estudios Conservacíonistas de Universidad de San Carlos) runs a rescue program for sea turtle eggs and also has a collection of green iguanas and crocodiles that you can visit. At one time, there were 250 species of sea turtles in the world; only eight remain. Of those, three species are indigenous to the southern coast of Guatemala: the olive Ridley, the East Pacific green, and the green leatherback. All three come to the Costa Sur to lay their eggs in the black sand. When the moon is full, females use the moonlight to guide them. They dig huge pits and deposit up to 25 eggs at one time. Only one or two of the offspring will make it to adulthood. Unfortunately, the eggs are highly sought after for their supposed aphrodisiac properties. The residents of Monterrico support themselves through the sale of turtle eggs and had nearly caused the turtles' extinction until the university developed the turtle rescue project. Now, locals hand back 20% of all eggs collected to the sanctuary and, when the CECON has spare money, it can buy back surplus eggs.

The eggs are placed in guarded nesting spots for hatching. The baby turtles must dig their way out of the pit and dash across the sand to the water. Most are devoured by predators on their way out to sea, but CECON tries to give them a helping hand.

*The center has developed a fund-raising **turtle race**. For Q10, you "buy" a hatchling and watch it race to the sea with its siblings. The owner of the winning turtle gets a T-shirt, a tour from CECON-USAC or a dinner at a local restaurant. The cheering humans also keep the birds, crabs and fish away so the hatchlings can get a head start.*

MONTERRICO GUIDED TOURS

CECON runs a number of guided tours through the reserve in either a motorboat or canoe. Take a quiet canoe tour if you want to see wildlife. San Carlos University's Center for Conservation Studies (CECON), Av la Reforma 0-63, Zona 10, CP 01010, Guatemala City, ☎ 502/331-0904, fax 502/334 7664, www.usac.edu.gt/cecom, cecon@usac.edu.gt. There is no way to get in touch with the turtle reserve directly unless you go to Monterrico. Costs for the tours start at Q40 per person.

Sapo Tours is just one of many boat tour operators at the **Tortugario Monterrico Visitor's Center**. Trips last about two hours and cost Q50 per person.

ReuXtreme, 4ta Calle 4-23, Zona 1, inside Hostal Santa Maria, Retalhuleu, ☎ 502/5-202-8180, www.reuxtreme.com, has several different tours of the area starting at US $25 per person.

Fishermen

SPANISH SCHOOL

Proyecto Linguistico Monterrico, Aldea Monterrico, www.playademonterrico.com/proyling. htm. Learn Spanish on the beach at this local school that offers 20 hours of lessons for US $70. For an additional $50, you can lodge with a local family. The study schedule allows time for swimming and lounging on the beach.

WHERE TO STAY

Accommodations are quite simple. All hotels are on the beach and the most important things to check for are proper screens and mosquito nets without holes. Mosquitoes are plentiful and pesky here. You might also check that your overhead fan works, as this place gets steamy.

HOTEL PRICE CHART	
Prices are per person	
$	under US $25
$$	US $26-50
$$$	US $51-85
$$$$	US $86-125
$$$$$	over US $125

Hotel El Mangle, *Aldea Montericco, ☎ 502/5-514-8958, 11 rooms, $.* A comfortable room in this quiet, tiny hotel might be just what you're looking for. Rooms have fans, mosquito nets and private baths, and the beds are in excellent shape. Outside, plenty of hammocks are lined up for afternoon siestas. No credit cards.

Johnny's Place, *Turtle Beach, ☎ 502/5-812-0409, www.monterrico-guatemala.com/ johnnys-place.htm, 4 bungalows ($$), 20 rooms ($).* This 12-year-old hotel is a favorite with locals and tourists who enjoy the family atmosphere and comfortable bungalows with fully equipped kitchens, private bath and pool. Some rooms also offer private baths. An excellent restaurant serves fresh fish and the pool is open to all visitors. The hotel will gladly arrange tours of the reserve, boat rentals and rent snorkeling equipment.

Hotel Café del Sol, *Aldea Monterrico, ☎ 502/5-810-0821, www.cafe-del-sol.com, 13 rooms, $.* The friendly Swiss-Guatemalan-led hotel offers large rooms under thatched roofs. The economy rooms share a

roof, so you will hear your neighbor. Newer rooms are more private. Front rooms are attached to the restaurant in front of the ocean, while the newer rooms are in back with the Jacuzzi and pool. Food from the restaurant is simply fantastic, especially the delicious fresh fish.

Kaiman Inn, *Montericco Taxisco, ☎ 502/5-617-9880, 8 rooms, $.*This small hotel has tiny but very clean rooms with fans, good mosquito nets and private bath with hot water. When the hotel gets crowded on the weekend the rooms are doubled-up so you may find yourself sharing with someone else. The restaurant here serves excellent Italian food. No credit cards.

Hotel Pez de Oro. *Aldea Montericco, 9 bungalows. $$. ☎ 502/2-368-3684.* This is the nicest hotel on the beach. It has clean and nicely decorated bungalows with fans, mosquito nets, private baths and lovely porches with hammocks to lie in and watch the ocean. There is also a large, clean pool alongside a restaurant serving excellent fish and ceviche dishes. Prices are higher on the weekends. No credit cards.

WHERE TO EAT

Seafood and fresh fish are the specialties here. Try the sea bass (*robálo*), shark (*tiburon*) or shrimp ceviche.

Kaiman Inn, *Montericco Taxisco, ☎ 502/5-617-9880.* The Kaiman Inn serves the best Italian food in town. Fresh pasta with a variety of sauces (try the seafood marinara), good salads and excellent fish make this place a standout. Q15-25. No credit cards.

Hotel Pez de Oro, *Aldea Montericco, ☎ 502/5-204-5249.* A lovely seaside restaurant serving excellent seafood dishes, grilled fish and wonderful ceviche. Q35-50. No credit cards.

Pig Pen Pub, *next door to Hotel Pez de Oro, no phone.* Run by a Canadian, this beachfront bar is the place to come and hang out, enjoy the cold drinks and meet other people. The owner knows the area really well and can arrange tours. QA10-25 (depending on how much you drink). No credit cards.

Hotel Café del Sol, Aldea Monterrico. ☎ 502/5-810-0821, www.cafe-del-sol.com Simply the best food on the beach. Enjoy fresh ceviche, fish, chicken and other Guatemalan and Swiss dishes. The beer is nice and cold as well.

Department of Escuintla

Escuintla is the commercial heart of Guatemala. The slopes of the Sierra Madre Mountains have been turned into cattle and dairy ranches and planted with sugarcane, coffee, cotton, fruits, corn, beans and other vegetables. This is also a manufacturing area that produces articles for fishing, marimbas, furniture, shoes, leather goods and food products. The popular ice cream manufacturer, Sarita's, has its headquarters here. The department's capital of the same name has little to offer the tourist, but it serves as a commercial and transportation hub. If you are exploring the region, you will end up in Escuintla for bus connections. Northwest of Escuintla are the sugarcane fields of Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa, where a series of ruins have been uncovered. The southern coast caters to sportfishing and has a number of beach resorts for wealthy Guatemalans.

© Hannes Grobe

Sugar cane field

HISTORY

Escuintla was one of the first areas to be occupied by the **Olmec** from Mexico. They left a series of statues, small altars and giant carved stone heads scattered throughout the area, many dating to 400 BC that resemble the giant heads found in Mexico. In AD 200, the Olmec built the port city of **Acapán** (since lost to the jungle), which became a major port along the Pacific trade routes. During the Classic period (AD 300-900), the **Pipil** started to take over the established trade routes. By then, the Olmec had disappeared from the region.

Escuintla translates from Pipil language into "Hill of the Dogs" and refers to the paca agouti (*tepezcuintle*), a large rodent raised by natives for its meat. When the **Spanish** conquistadors visited in 1524, they thought the paca were a new breed of dog, which the Pipils found amusing and thus the name. Pedro de Alvarado found the heat and humidity too much and did not linger in the area. Instead, he sent **Franciscan monks** to convert the locals. They built the colonial cities of Gotzumalguapa and Alotec and supervised the first sugar plantations. Colonists and farmers followed, starting up large cattle ranches, indigo manufacturing plants and coffee farms. During this period there were actually two separate departments – Escuintla and Guazacapán. In 1825, shortly after independence, the two departments were combined into one. In 1888 a railway was built connecting the capital to Guatemala City and securing Escuintla's role as a commercial and manufacturing hub. It remains one of the most productive departments in the country.

ESCUINTLA

ADVENTURES IN NATURE

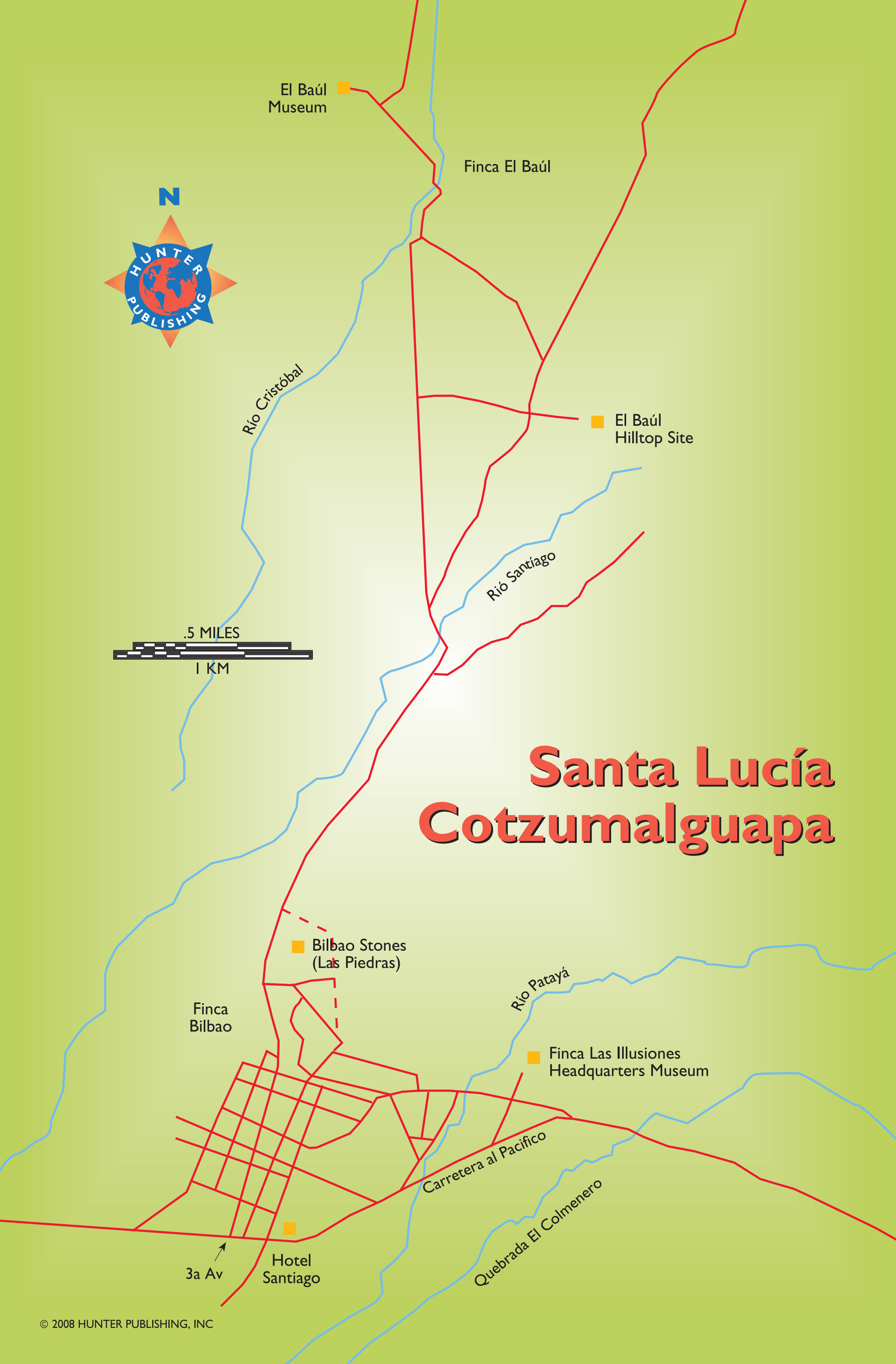
LIONS, TIGERS & RHINOS

Autosafari Chapín, Carreterra al Pacifico, Km 87.5, ☎ 502/2-363-1105. This little gem of a place is an unexpected and pleasant surprise just 18.6 miles (30 km) from Escuintla on the road to Taxisco, Santa Rosa. The same family has owned the land for centuries. The original owner, a wealthy farmer, was a big game hunter and covered the walls of his hacienda with the heads and skin of animals he had "bagged" on safari. The latest generation are conservationists and, instead of killing the animals, started bringing them home as pets. The result is Chapín Safari, where lions, giraffes, hippos, rhinos, pumas, deer, antelope, coyotes and leopards wander freely in the habitats created for them. Most are obviously happy since all (except for the rhino) have reproduced. Although you must drive through the safari in either the Autosafari van or your own car, a small walkway leads through a zoo centered on a lake. It houses the local (and much tamer) species, such as white-tailed deer, peccaries, macaws and iguanas. Hardly any foreigners come here and the park is geared toward Guatemalan families who come for day-trips. There is a restaurant and swimming pool on site. Open 8 am to dusk, Tuesday to Sunday. Admission is Q30.

SANTA LUCÍA COTZUMALGUAPA

Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa is 35 miles (57 km) east of the capital. This whole area is planted with sugar cane and is of little interest to the tourist except for the great stone heads carved by a mysterious tribe of northerners. Evidence points to the Olmecs, who were the predecessors of the Maya and Aztec civilizations and the originators of many of the scientific and cultural discoveries used by them. No one knows why the giant heads were placed here. The actual city of Santa Lucía is rather

Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa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Río Patayá
Finca Las Illusiones
Headquarters Museum
Carretera al Pacifico
Quebrada El Colmenero
3a Av
Hotel
Santiago

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ragged and not very pretty but, if you want to explore these ruins, it is the jumping-off point.

GETTING HERE & GETTING AROUND

Direct buses run from Guatemala City, Escuintla and Retalhuleu to Santa Lucía. A few companies do offer tours out this way, but they sell them at ridiculously inflated prices, almost 200% more than what you pay if you set out your own. The bus ride is not hard and, once in town, you can hire a taxi to take you to various sites for no more than Q70. You can even walk to the ruins, identified by the *finca* where they were found. If you have trouble locating any of the ruins, ask one of the locals for "*las piedras*" (the stones).

MAYA RUINS

FINCA BILBAO

Finca Bilbao is north of Santa Lucía. The heads here were first discovered in the late 1880s by European archeologists who shipped nine of the best heads to the Dahlem Museum in Berlin. One was lost at sea, but eight made it to the museum in Berlin. Four sets of stones remain at Bilbao and are beautiful examples of the intricate carvings done on the black volcanic stone. Two large stones covered with dots and circles have been identified as the glyphs of the Maya calendar. Farther along in the sugarcane are two more sets of stones, which are much more eroded. One has only its border left, but the second stone has superb carvings of figures, including a ball player surrounded by animals and birds. The final stone is located at the bottom of the field near the second entrance. This stone is a giant face that has been damaged by looters.

> GETTING HERE: *You can walk to the Finca Bilbao ruins by going uphill from the plaza and following 4 Av to a dirt track that runs parallel to the sugarcane fields. Once the path widens, you'll see the heads about 721 feet (220 meters) from there.*

FINCA EL BAUL

Finca El Baul sits atop a small hill surrounded by sugarcane. The site is still used for religious ceremonies and many of the small stone altars are covered with candles and other offerings. The first stone you'll see is a flat relief. Beside it is the most interesting piece, a half-buried figure. This carved head has an odd-looking beaked nose, eyes with no pupils, elaborate headdress and gruesome grin. The top of its head is blackened with soot and candles. They are many beautiful pieces here, but none has been identified or dated.

Close by the ruins is a museum that has an excellent collection of carvings, including a stone skull, massive jaguar and sculpted figures and reliefs. To get to the museum on foot, go back to the unpaved road and walk along the dirt track until you reach a paved road that leads to the *finca* headquarters. Cross over the bridge. You will pass by some houses and the sugar refinery before reaching the armed security guards. Ask them if you can visit the museum and they will unlock the doors.

> GETTING HERE: *El Baul is about 2½ miles (four km) north of the city. You can walk to Finca El Baul, but it will be hot and slow. It's probably best to hire a cab. Follow the road north to the church and go 1.86 miles (three km) to a fork in the road and a sign that reads "Los Tarros" (The Jars). Local buses travel this route as far as the sign. Turn right and go about 1¼ miles (two km) to a dirt road where a hill sticks up in the middle of an otherwise flat field planted with sugarcane. The hill is actually a unrestored temple. On its south side is a road leading up to the heads. A taxi out to the* finca *and back will be around Q50.*

FINCA LAS ILUSIONES

East of the city is Finca Las Ilusiones, which offers an excellent private collection of artifacts and stone carvings. You will recognize the museum from the stelae located just outside the front door. Inside are thousands of small stone carvings and pottery fragments. Many of the carvings are unusual and resemble nothing else found in the Maya world. Some date to the Olmec period. Unfortunately, nothing has been catalogued. The museum doesn't keep regular hours. Ask around for the person who has the keys that day.

> GETTING HERE: *This finca is difficult to reach since there are no public buses or proper roads. You can walk here by following Calzada 15 de Septembre along to the Esso Station where the highway begins. Follow the highway northeast for a short distance to an unpaved road. Walk along this road for about .62 mile (one km) to the museum. You can take a taxi from town to the dirt road for about Q35.*

MONTE ALTO

This is one of the most mysterious sites of the Maya world. It is obviously much older than other sites, and researchers are unsure who first lived here. The giant carved heads and other artifacts point to the Olmecs, who predate the Maya. Researchers did some intense investigation in 1968-1970, but their discoveries only added to the mystery. The large heads with crude carvings, which date to the Olmec period (1500-1200 BC), were found alongside two stelae and two stone altars. But 15 other stelae and other artifacts indicate the area was occupied as far back as 1800 BC. Early to Middle Formative-era (200 BC-AD 200) structures were found mixed with others from the Early Classic period (AD 300-400). The nature of the site has not been determined, but many monuments are built to align with Ursa Major, the Great Bear constellation, during the summer solstice and may have been used for astronomy. Today, most of the interesting artifacts have been removed to the museum in Democracia and there are only the covered mounds left to explore.

GETTING HERE: *Monte Alto is in Democracía, 1 km east of the village.*

NEARBY TOWNS

DEMOCRACIA

Democracia is six miles (9½ km) south of Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa. There is little to see in this town except the giant Olmec heads that have been taken from nearby Monte Alto site and arranged in the main plaza. The locals refer to them as *chamcos gordos* (fat boys), an accurate description of the large, squat stones carved with simple, childlike faces. These heads are thought to be over 4,000 years old, which would make Monte Alto one of the first settlements in Guatemala.

Museo Rubèn Chevez Van Dorne, facing the plaza. This small but very well organized museum houses some of the area's most interesting archeological finds. The beautiful jade mask you see has just recently been recovered after being stolen in early 2001 and sold on the black market. There are also carved figures, ceremonial yokes worn by ball players, relief carvings, grinding stones, more carved heads and lots of pottery. Open 9 am-noon and 2-5 pm, Tuesday-Sunday. Admission is 35 centavos.

WHERE TO STAY & EAT IN ESCUINTLA

You should stay in either Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa or Escuintla (Democracia has no hotels or restaurants), where most of the hotels are in the budget range.

Hotel Santiaguito, *Km 90.4 Carrterra al Pacifico, Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa, ☎ 502/7-882-5435, fax 592/7-882-2585, 35 rooms, $$.* This is the most modern hotel in town. It tries hard to be glitzy and sophisticated, but doesn't succeed. Rooms are generic, with two queen-size beds, private baths with hot water, air conditioning and satellite TV. There is a large pool and a restaurant that serves passable Guatemalan fare.

Hotel Costa Sur, *12 Calle 4-13, Zona 1, Escuintla ☎ 502/7-888-1819, 17 rooms, $.* This hotel is close to the bus terminal and offers simple, clean rooms with private baths with hot water. The restaurant on-site serves reasonable local food.

Hotel La Villa, *3a Calle 3-28, Zona 1, Escuintla, ☎ 502/7-888-0398, 27 rooms, $.* A quiet hotel with a nice lobby, a swimming pool and a very good restaurant. Very comfortable rooms have private bath (without hot water), air conditioning, small balconies, nice linens and cable TV.

Hotel Texas, *Av Centroamérica 156-04, Zona 3, Escuintla, ☎ 502/7-889-1081, fax 502/889-1083, 28 rooms, $$.* This modern hotel has little atmosphere, but its super-clean rooms have double beds, private baths, hot water, air conditioning and cable TV.

PUERTO SAN JOSÉ

San José is the country's second-largest commercial port (after Puerto Barrios on the Caribbean side). It is connected to Guatemala City via the Pan American Highway (CA-9). Like its sister port, San José is a languid and slightly seedy town catering to sailors and *Ladinos* who like to come and strut their stuff. However, on either side of the city are posh, exclusive resorts catering to wealthy Guatemalans.

HISTORY

Iztapa was the first port in this area, built by the Maya but taken over by Alvarado. It did not last long, since most of the shipping done by the kingdom of Guatemala was from Acajutla in El Salvador. In 1814, during the independence movement, the Guatemalan government re-opened Iztapa, but the port was in such disrepair that everything was eventually transferred to San José in 1851. Because San José lacks a natural harbor, a large iron wharf (now an antique) was constructed in 1868 to entice commerce. By 1875, the area had grown to just over 5,000 people. In 1880 the railroad from Guatemala City was extended down to San José. The city has remained a commercial port since then, and now has a population of just under 20,000.

In 1982, Port Quetzal was given a new dock and the iron wharf was abandoned (it is now a place where locals gather to fish, drink beer and hang out).

There isn't much tourism here, but in the last three years San José has been gaining a reputation for sportfishing. An enormous natural eddy attracts the small tuna upon which big game fish like to feed, so the waters are teeming with Pacific sailfish, sought after by fly-fishermen.

The beaches around San José are becoming popular with surfers. During the week an occasional cruise ships stops in, but otherwise the area is deserted, making it the perfect place for lounging. On weekends and holidays the place tends to fill up with Guatemalan families trying to escape the city.

GETTING HERE

Regular bus service from Guatemala City to Puerto San José takes about three hours. Several shuttle services also come from Antigua to Iztapa, one of the local resorts popular with tourists. Once you have arrived in town, all local transportation is by boat.

ADVENTURES ON WATER

BEACHES

Beaches get very hot because of their black volcanic soil that quickly absorbs the heat. Fortunately, most have small huts that offer shelter, food and drink.

WARNING: Watch the strong currents and take your cue from the locals – if they are not in the water, you shouldn't be either. Don't leave valuables on the beach. Petty thieves are a real problem.

Balneario Chulmar, 3½ miles (5½ km) west of San José, has the nicest beach in the area as well as several decent *comedores*. You'll need a taxi (about Q40) to reach Chulmar.

Eight miles (five km) east of San José is **Balneario Likín**, a planned residential community centered around canals. The beach here is smooth and wide; it's also deserted during the weekdays. Catch any bus heading out to Iztapa and ask to be let off at Likín.

BIG GAME FISHING IN IZTAPA

The ancient Maya port of Iztapa is now the main location for big game fishing. The Maya built this port in the Late Pre-Classic period between 1400 and 1500 BC. When Alvarado landed with his Conquistadors in 1524, they took over and used the port to repair ships. The settlement was abandoned shortly afterwards and was ignored for several hundred years until a brief period between 1815 to 1845, when it acted as a port for the newly dependent Guatemala. When San José took over, Iztapa fell into disuse before being revived as a beach resort.

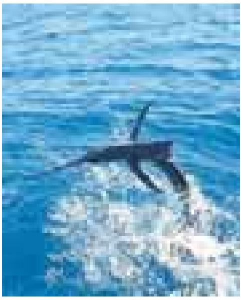
Most of the country's sportfishing operations are centered in Itzápa because it is only 25 miles (40 km) away from where the big game fish feed. The shortest fishing trip takes two days and one night and the longest lasts one full week. Boats – usually 30-foot (9½-meter) Bertrams – come completely crewed with professional fishermen. For shorter trips, 25-foot (7½-meter) Super Sport Panga Mexican skiffs are used. The company that runs the fishing tournaments, below, also organizes fishing trips. Or you can simply ask for a boat at the main dock.

FISH-FRIENDLY FISHING

Always check that your company runs a catch-and-release operation. You catch the big fish, get your picture taken with your prize and release it back into the ocean. This conservation program is being practiced all over the world. The largest and most sought-after sailfish are females, but if too many of them are caught and killed, the species may die off. You can't eat sailfish, so it makes sense to let them go.

Trips begin in the early morning and travel 40 miles (64 km) out to sea, where there are plenty of blue and black marlin, sailfish, swordfish, dorado, barracuda, roosterfish, and wahoo.

FISHING TOURNAMENTS

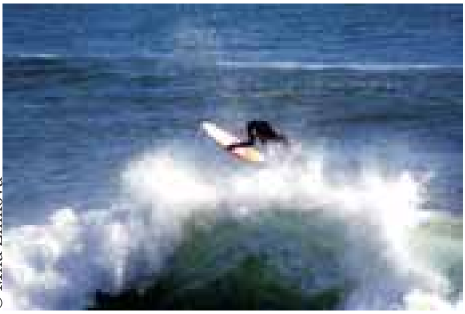


A number of fishing tournaments held here offer a good opportunity to break into this high-powered sport. If you would like to learn more about these events or improve your sailfish technique, **The Great Sailfishing Company** offers a fly-fishing school. This instructional tour includes four full days of instruction, fly-fishing equipment, accommodations, transportation and all meals. You even get a certificate at the end of the course. The company also offers big game fishing. For more information and rates, contact The Great Sailfishing Company, Sector B, Lote #7, apto. 3, El Panorama, La Antigua, Sacatepéquez, ☎ 502/7-832-1991, 877-441-FISH, www.greatsailfishing.com.

SURFING AT ZIPACATE & EL PARADON

This part of the Pacific Ocean has incredible waves that have caught the attention of surfers worldwide. Be prepared for primitive accommodations and basic food, even though Guatemala is rapidly becoming a world class destination for surfing. There are over 22 beach breaks, many of which now have surf camps by them. It's hard to get to these camps on your own, so it's recommended you contact one of the companies listed below. The two favored beaches are Zipacate and El Paredon.

Zipacate's large sandbar along the shoreline creates waves up to 492 feet (150 meters) high and 984 feet (300 meters) long. The area is suitable for all skill levels. To reach Zipacate beach, take a bus from Guatemala City to Escuintla and transfer to a local bus for the village of Zipacate. You'll walk from the town to the beach. You can rent a



© Mila Zinkova

Surfer

wooden bungalow at **Rancho Carillo**, ☎ 502/5-515-1069, for as little as US $10 per day. Some have kitchens, but there is also a restaurant on site. An easier option might be to contact **Maya Extreme Surf Shop**, CC Pradera Concepción Local # 308, Guatemala, ☎ 502/6-634-7772 or 502/5-571-9250/60, www.surfin guatemala.com. They know all the surf camps and can make all arrangements. Their shop also builds and repairs boards.

El Paredon is a popular beach located in the newly formed Sipacate-Naranjo National Park. The shore here has a large beach-break and sandy bottom with waves that match the size of those at Zipacate. Unfortunately, there is no direct bus service, but the new surfing camp here offers shuttle service from Antigua. **El Paredon Surf Camp** is a recent project of the eco-tour company Aventuras Naturales, which hopes to bring income to the locals by developing a haven for surfers. The camp's lodging is still under construction, but a host family offers basic accommodations and meals. The camp offers lessons in both surfing and bodysurfing to people of all ages. For more information, contact **Aventuras Naturales,** Colonia El Naranjo No 53, La Antigua, Sacatepéquez, ☎/fax 502/7-832-3328, http://elparedon surfcamp.tripod.com.

WHERE TO STAY

It's the two extremes here in San José: ultra-luxury or budget. Check out any of the budget hotels before signing in to make sure they do not cater to the drunken sailor crowd that takes over downtown San José on the weekends. The farther the hotel is from the local bars, the quieter and emptier it will be.

Pacific Fins Guatemala, *Aldea Buena Vista, Iztapa, ☎ 800/280-5565 or 631/668-2019, www.tropicalfishing.com/fins.htm, 8 rooms, $$$$$.* This luxury Fins 'n Feathers Inn complex has four villas, each with two bedrooms and bathrooms, central air conditioning, a fully equipped kitchenette and sitting room with satellite TV. Doors lead out to a sundeck overlooking the pool, landscaped gardens and dock. An ocean-view restaurant serves international cuisine. A variety of fishing packages is offered.

© Pacific Fins Guatemala

HOTEL PRICE CHART	
Prices are per person	
$	under US $25
$$	US $26-50
$$$	US $51-85
$$$$	US $86-125
$$$$$	over US $125

Sol y Playa Tropical, *1a Calle 5-48, Zona 1, Iztapa, ☎ 502/7-881-4365, 28 rooms, $.* This is small family run hotel is clean and quiet. Rooms, which look out onto a lovely pool and garden, are large and nicely decorated with Guatemalan textiles. Each has a double bed, private bath with hot water, overhead fans and cable TV.

Casa Verde, *Av Maquelles and Calle de Esso, San José, ☎ 502/7-881-1161, fax 502/881-1078, 25 rooms, $$$.* This cute establishment offers single or double rooms with air conditioning, two double beds, full bathroom with Jacuzzi tub and a small patio that opens up onto the pool. Behind the docks is a restaurant serving American-style food, including USDA prime steak (they are very proud of this). A fully equipped bungalow that sleeps six is also available. There's a small convention center available for groups and the hotel will arrange fishing trips.

Turicentro Martita, *5a Calle, Av del Comercio, Lote #26, San José, PBX 502/7-881-1337, fax 502/7-881-26463, www.hotelmartita.com, 8 rooms, $$.* This is a very modern hotel offering large, sunny rooms with generic décor, comfortable beds, air conditioning, cable TV and private baths with lots of hot water. Each has a small balcony or patio that looks onto the pool. Although this place lacks character, it is very comfortable and clean. The restaurant serves excellent seafood dinners and the hotel will arrange fishing trips.

Turicentro Agua Azul, *Km 106.5 Carreterra al Puerto, San José, ☎ 502/7-881-1667, fax 502/7-881-1667, 32 rooms, $$.* Geared toward Guatemalan families, Agua Azul is a well-run hotel. It offers large rooms equipped with two double beds, private baths with hot water, cable TV and air conditioning. There's a very large pool on site, as well as an excellent restaurant serving Guatemalan cuisine. No credit cards.

Hotel Posada del Quetzal, *Av 30 de Junio, San José, ☎ 502/7-881-1601, fax 502/881-2494. 18 rooms, $$.* Like Agua Azul, this reasonably priced hotel also caters to Guatemalan families. Rooms are clean and cheery, with one double bed, private bath with hot water and air conditioning. There is a decent-sized pool with a nice restaurant. It's not the most elegant place, but it's comfortable. If no rooms are available, ask about their smaller sister property next door (unfortunately, rooms there don't have hot water). No credit cards.

Casa San José Hotel, *Av del Comercio and 9a Calle Esquina, San José, ☎ 502/7-881-3316, 10 rooms, $.* This is the best budget hotel in town and it manages to stay somewhat quiet on the weekends. It has a very tiny pool and a restaurant. Rooms are basic, with private bath, hot water, overhead fans and cable TV. No credit cards.

WHERE TO EAT

The whole downtown beach is packed with *comedores* offering excellent grilled fish and shrimp, fresh ceviche and, when available, other seafood. The food is simple but good. You can visit any of the hotels listed above, all of which have decent restaurants open to the public. Like the hotel scene, dining here is either cheap with no ambience or expensive with too much ambience.

Department of Retalhuleu

The department of Retalhuleu is where the Pacific and Northern Highlands meet. It shares borders with Quetzaltenango, Suchitepequez and San Marcos. Because it has become a gateway to and from the Pacific, Retalhuleu is the most prosperous of the departments, producing sugar, cotton, coffee, maize, beans, rice, cacao, rubber and fruit. But it is most famous for dairy cattle, considered the finest in the country. There are many wealthy cattle ranchers in this department and they like to relax in the beautiful capital, **Retalhuleu**, usually referred to as Rey. There is also more indigenous culture here with a large population of Quiché Maya. There aren't many tourist attractions, but don't let that stop you. The region does have a famous beach at Champerico, the ruins of Abaj Takalik and the huge Xocomil Aquatic Park.

© Shelagh McNally

Flowers adorn a home in Retalhuleu

GETTING HERE & GETTING AROUND

Direct buses come from Guatemala City to Retalhuleu City. If you are arriving from Panajachel, Lake Atitlán or any of the northern highland villages, catch a bus in Quetzaltenango for a short (36-mile/59 km) ride to the capital.

There is a good public transportation in the city and taxis are cheap and plentiful. Most of the hotels are within walking distance of the downtown central plaza. To visit the ruins or get to the beaches, use local buses.

© Shelagh McNally

Entrance to the city is vis a palm-lined avenue

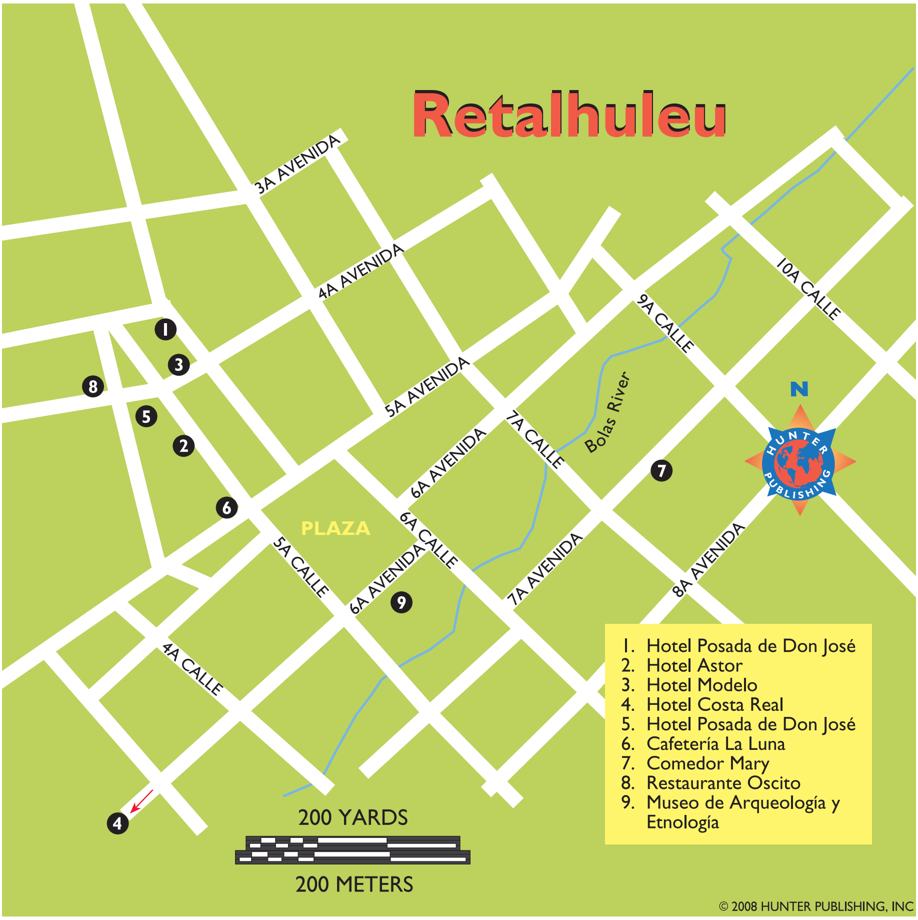
RETALHULEU

HISTORY

The name Retalhuleu is Quiché Maya and it best translates as "Earth Signal." Legend has it that when Pedro de Alvarado arrived he raised his sword in a salute. The metal caught the sunlight and the reflection appeared to divide the territory in two. To the left was the Quiché territory, which they named Retalhuleu (it was also known as the Capital of the New World).

Retalhuleu is the largest city in the Pacific region. It was originally created when the church merged two Quiché villages in the 1540s, but the city did not really start growing until the 1830s, when the area was settled by farmers and ranchers. It developed quickly and by 1849 was a major commercial and agriculture hub. In 1877, the government officially declared Retalhuleu the capital of the newly created department. It has enjoyed a more peaceful history than the rest of the country.

There isn't much to do in Rey except enjoy the easygoing pace of the city. The city's lovely plaza with Greek-inspired sculpture is set in a landscaped park. Off from the plaza is a large, bright white colonial church built by the Franciscan monks. Alongside the church are several ornate municipal buildings.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1. Hotel Posada de Don José
2. Hotel Astor
3. Hotel Modelo
4. Hotel Costa Real
5. Hotel Posada de Don José
6. Cafetería La Luna
7. Comedor Mary
8. Restaurante Oscito
9. Museo de Arqueología y Etnología
200 YARDS
200 METERS

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SIGHTS

Rey is the cultural center for the Pacific, so it often has exhibits and music festivals, along with a number of religious holidays celebrated by the Quiché.

Museo de Arquelogico y Etnologia, 6a Av, is a small but well-organized museum with archeological relics from 33 sites in the region. The most impressive are from Abaj Takalik and include small figurines carved from stone and jade. Upstairs is a collection of historical photos dating from 1888 and a mural showing the location of various ruins. Open 8 am-1 pm and 2-5 pm, Tuesday to Sunday. Admission is Q7.

ABAJ TAKALIK RUINS

About 18 miles (30 km) west of Rey is one of the most important Prehispanic sites in Guatemala. The name Abaj Takalik is Quiché for "Standing Stone" and refers to the giant carved heads. The ruins are set in the middle of five coffee plantations owned by the Ralda family. They have donated 22 *manzanas* (neighborhoods) which make up the core of the park.

HISTORY

Abaj Takalik may have been occupied as early as 1800 BC. Its first building was erected between 500 and 200 BC. There is evidence of a continual development in architecture and sculpture right up until the Late Pre-Classic period (200 BC-AD100). The giant carved heads found here have been identified as Olmec but the date and origin of other sculptures remain a mystery. Stelae show that Abaj Takalik had ties with the powerful Kaminal Juyú in the Guatemalan highlands and Chocolá on the coastal plains in Mexico. These alliances helped the city develop into a major trade route and become a commercial center. But research indicates the site may have also been used for ceremonial purposes since many buildings are aligned to follow the path of the Ursa Major constellation.

The site was abandoned at the same time as other cities and remained hidden in the jungle for centuries until 1888, when it was re-discovered by a botanist. **Dr. Gustavo L. Bruhl** brought attention to Abaj Takalik, but it took until 1924 before any serious investigation was done. At that time, **Walter Lehman** and **Erick Thompson** began a systematic mapping of the area, employing a method that is still used today. In 1942, **Tatiana Proskouriakoff** laid to rest the argument that the site was not Maya by analyzing some of its hieroglyphics. Since then, it has been recognized as a mixture of Olmec and Maya culture.

In 1976, the University of Berkeley California began a formal excavation that was concluded in 1981. Miguel Orrego Corozo from IDAEH took over the project in 1986 and has been working on it since.

EXPLORING THE RUINS

The ruins are fascinating. Alongside giant heads carved by the Olmecs are stelae carved by the Maya. Many of the buildings have not been cleared, but the largest concentration so far is found in a 5½-mile

(nine-km) belt extending north to south, flanked on the east and west by Río Ixchiyá and Río Xab. This area has nine reinforced natural terraces with more than 70 major mounds and 239 monuments distributed in three principal groups. To date, more than 170 sculptures have been found at this site. Two of the platforms that have been cleared revealed two temple monuments with carved altars and stelae beneath. **Monument 68** has carvings of frogs and toads mixed with hieroglyphics, while **Monument 66** is covered in alligators. **Stela 5**, also found in this area, dates to AD 126 and shows two standing figures separated by a large hieroglyphic panel. **Stela 2** (200 BC) also has carvings and hieroglyphics.

In July 2002, a **royal tomb** was uncovered. While no skeleton was found, there were a number of precious objects, including a jadeite necklace, bracelets, earflares, jade rectangular plaques, three mirrors laminated with a pyrite mosaic and a sculpted greenstone fish. Archeologists Christa Schieber de Lavarreda and Miguel Orrego believe these objects date to AD 100-200 and that the tomb is that of the last ruler of Ajab Takalik.

This site remains a working archeological zone and a visit here offers a fascinating glimpse at how digs are conducted. The local Quiché still use the site for religious ceremonies. If you come across a ritual being conducted, please don't take pictures. Open 7 am to 5 pm, daily. Admission is Q25 for tourists. There are no services, so bring along food and drink.

GETTING HERE: *From Rey, take a local bus going to the village of El Asintal, where pickups and taxis provide rides to the ruins for about Q10. Some companies offer shuttle service to the ruins from Xela. Contact* ***Guatemaya Intercultural,*** *Quetzaltenango, ☎/fax 502/7-765-0040; or* ***Offroad Tourism and Shuttle Service****, Quetzaltenango, ☎ 502/7-761-9924, fax 502/7-761-9576.*

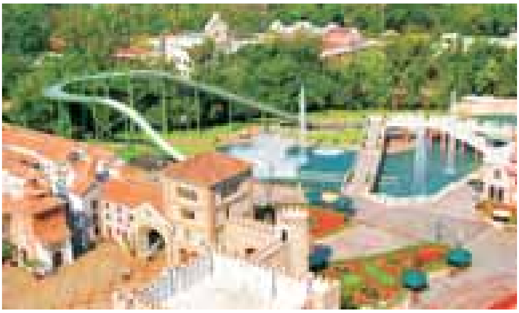
ADVENTURES ON WATER

WATER PARK

Parque Acuatico Xocomil, Km 180.5 de CITO-180, ☎ 502/7-772-5763, fax 502/7-772-5780, www.irtra.org.gt. Xocomil translates from Quiché to "Strong wind that blows on the water," a lovely name that has nothing to do with this colossal entertainment park. This is one of the largest water parks in Central America and can accommodate 6,000 people. It's worth coming just to see all the Maya kitsch.

There are 10 water slides that offer a total of 3,937 feet (1,200 meters) of fun. The most thrilling is the Nest of Serpents (*Nido de Serpientes*), which takes you down through tunnels that twist and turn all the way. On the lazy river you float down a 1,771-foot (540-meter) Maya canyon with giant plastic heads of ancient kings that spout water from their noble lips. A massive wave pool is complemented by an artificial beach. The kids' area has its own slides and rides, including the very cool pool shaped like a volcano that bubbles water out of the top. The colossal El Gran Chac restaurant, resembling one of the temples in Tikal, sells overpriced fast food. Comical wall murals depict Maya religious ceremonies.

In 2001 the park was given an award of excellence by the International Association of Aquatic Parks. It's tacky and a lot of fun. Open Thursday to Sunday, 9 am to 4 pm. Admission is Q70 for adults, Q25 for kids.



© Parque Acuatico Xocomil

> GETTING HERE: *Close to Rey, the park can be reached via public bus. Just ask to be let off at Kilómetro 180.5.*

SWIMMING AT CHAMPERICO

The southern coast of Retalhuleu is one long series of beaches: Tres Cruces, El Chico, Manchón, Champerico and Tulate. The only beach with services of any kind is Champerico.

Champerico is, supposedly, Guatemala's third-largest commercial port. But if the rusting pier is any indication, this area doesn't see a lot of action. The beach here is huge and goes on for miles, but you won't see many people swimming far from shore because of a vicious undertow. Be very careful when in the water. Aside from working on your tan, you can eat delicious fried shrimp and fish sold at the small beachside restaurants.

> **NOTE:** Don't stay over because the town is not safe or pleasant at night. Drunk and obnoxious youths from Guatemala City and Rey take over at sunset, driving their cars up and down the beach and through the streets. It's impossible to get any rest and often their par-

ties end in violence. It's better to visit this beach on a day-trip and return to Rey for the evening.

GETTING HERE: *Buses leave from Rey every half-hour for the 20-minute trip to the park. The road is in excellent condition. The last bus leaves from Champerico to Rey at 6 pm. Buses also run from Quetzaltenango every two hours. The trip takes two hours.*

WHERE TO STAY

Since few people visit here, hotels are scarce. However, there are a couple of gems where you will be comfortable. You need reservations only during Carnival and Easter Week.

Hotel Astor, *5a Calle 4-60, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-771-0475, fax 502/7-771-2562, 27 rooms, $$.* Ground-floor rooms at this charming hotel open onto a lovely courtyard filled with flowers. Second-floor rooms have a shared terrace. Accommodations are neat and clean. They have ceiling fans, private bath and cable TV.

Hotel Posada de Don José, *5a Calle 3-67, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-771-0180, fax 502/771-1179, 25 rooms, $$.* Located jut across from the railway station, this is probably the nicest hotel is town. It's modern without being sterile and has rooms furnished with nice wooden furniture, two double beds, air conditioning, cable TV, private bath and telephone. There's a nice pool as well as a good restaurant. Don José's is the first to fill up on the weekends. If it's full, ask about their new annex up the street. It has 11 rooms similar to those offered here.

Hotel Modelo, *5a Calle 4-53, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-771-0256, 7 rooms, $.* The Modelo is a decent budget hotel with clean rooms and shared bathrooms (no hot water). It's extremely basic, but it is clean and safe. No credit cards.

Hotel Costa Real, *Km 182.5, Carretera a Coatepeque, ☎ fax 502/7-771-2141, 34 rooms, $$.* Set on the outskirts of town, this semi-luxurious property is centered around a nice pool and restaurant. Rooms are bright and colorful, with two double beds, air conditioning, cable TV and private baths (sometimes with no hot water). The restaurant has a decent if uninspired menu.

WHERE TO EAT

The best restaurants are the small *comedores* centered around the plaza. **Comedor Mary** serves excellent Guatemalan meals with rice, beans and tortillas for Q20. **Cafeteria La Luna** also offers good lunches of chicken and fish for Q25.

UARDIENTE AÑEJO
ALTECA - ESPECIAL
7-33

Cantina, Retalhuleu
(© Shelagh McNally)

Hotel Posada de Don José, *5a Calle 3-67, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-771-0180, fax 502/7-771-1179.* This very pleasant hotel restaurant is a favorite with locals. You'll find excellent roast chicken, fresh fish and grilled steaks on the menu, all served with soup, salad, rice and beans for Q70. Breakfasts are excellent and include such offerings as fresh orange juice, pancakes and egg dishes. The coffee is really good.

Restaurante Oscito, *5a Calle 4-50, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-771-1393.* This restaurant offers traditional Guatemalan food at decent prices. Their *pollo pepian* (chicken in a spicy pumpkin sauce) shouldn't be missed, and they also have excellent grilled fish with garlic and wonderful ceviche. Q40. No credit cards.

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Appendix

INFORMATION SOURCES

CONSERVATION ORGANIZATIONS

Conservation is an important issue and a number of organizations actively promoting conservation in Guatemala have excellent resources where you can learn more about the country's protected areas.

Friends of the Forest Association and Wildlife Preservation Trust International (Amigos del Bosque), 16 Calle 6-18, Zona 3, Guatemala City. ☎ 502/2-220-7979, fax 502/2-220-7708, amibosque@hotmail.com.

Center for Studies in Conservation at University of San Carlos (Centro de Estudios Conservacíonistas de la Universidad de San Carlos), Av la Reforma 0-63, Zona 10, Guatemala City, ☎ 502/2-331-0904, fax 502/2-334-7662.

Council for Natural Resources (Comision Centroaméricana para el Ambiente y Desarrollo, CCAD) 7a Av 13-01, Zona 9, Edificio La Cúpula, Guatemala City, ☎ 502/2-360-5426, fax 502/2-334-3876.

National Council of Protected Areas (Consejo Nacional de Areas Protegidas), 5a Av 6-06, Zona 1, Edificio IPM 7a Nivel, Guatemala City, ☎ 502/2-238-0000, fax 502/2-251-8588.

Conservation International, 2501 M St NW, Suite 200, Washington DC, 20037, ☎ 800/459-5660, newmember@conservation.org.

Defense of Nature Foundation (Fundación Defensores de la Naturaleza), 2a Av 2-71, Zona 3, Río Hondo, Zacapa, ☎ 502/7-934-0161. The main office is in Guatemala City, 19 Av B 083, Zona 15, Vista Hermosa II, PBX 502/2-369-5151, www.defensores.org.gt.

Interamerican Foundation for Tropical Research (Fundación Interamericana de Investigacion Tropical, FIIT), Av Hincapie 31-31 Zona 13, Mision del Fortin, Apdo. 106, Guatemala City, ☎ fax 502/2--333-3555.

Mario Dary Rivera Foundation (Fundación Mario Dary Rivera, FUNDARY), Diagonal 6, 17-19, Zona 10, C.P. 01010, Guatemala City, ☎ 502/2-333-4957, fax 502/2-367-0171, Fundary@intelnet.net.gt.

Fundación para el Ecodesarrollo y la Conservacíon (FUNDAECO), 19 Av A089, Zona 15, Vista Hermosa II, ☎ 502/2-239-0298, 2-369-0231.

ParksWatch – Guatemala, Oficina de Trópico Verde, Vía 6, 4-25, Zona 4, Edificio Castaneda, Oficina 41, ☎ 502/2-339-4225, fax 502/2-331-0487, www.parkswatch.org.

Project Petén for Sustaining the Forests (Projecto Peténero para un Bosque Sosteniblen), Calle Central, Flores, Petén, ☎ 502/7-926-1370, fax 502/7-926-0495.

ECO-TOURISM AGENCIES

Certain areas in Guatemala are accessible only through eco-tour agencies who have permission to visit the area. The following list is organized by department and area.

ALL OF GUATEMALA

Maya Expeditions, 15 Calle 1-91, Zona 10, local 104, Guatemala City, ☎ 502/7-363-4955, fax 502/7-337-4660, www.mayaexpeditions.com.

Ecotourism & Adventure Specialists, Av la Reforma, 8-60, Zona 9, Guatemala City, ☎ 502/7-361-3104, www.ecotourism-adventure.com.

ALTA VERAPACE DEPARTMENT

Aventuras Turisticas, 1a Calle 3-25, Zona 1, or 3a Calle, Zona 3, Cobán, ☎ 502/7-951-1358.

Hostal d'Acuña, Calle 4 3-17, Zona 2, Cobán, ☎ 502/7-952-1547.

Caquipec Cloud Forest Trek: Proyecto Eco-Quetzal, 2a Calle 14-36, Zone 1, Cobán, ☎/fax 502/7-952-1047, bidaspeq@guate.net.

BAJA VERAPACE DEPARTMENT

El Salto de Chilascó: Fundación Defensores de la Naturaleza, 19 Av B 083, Zona 15, Vista Hermosa II, Guatemala City, PBX 502/2-369-5151, www.defensores.org.gt.

Quetzal Biosphere: Fundación para la Conservacíon del Medio Ambiente y los Recursos Naturales Mario Dary Rivera (FUNDARY), Diagonal 6, 17-19, Zona 10, C.P. 01010, Guatemala City, ☎ 502/2-333-4957, fax 502/2-367-0171, Fundary@intelnet.net.gt.

EL PETÉN DEPARTMENT

El Mirador Ruins/Scarlet Macaw Trail

ProPetén, Calle Central, Flores, ☎ 502/7-926-1370, fax 502/-7926-0495, www.propeten.org.

EcoMaya, Call 30 de Junio, Flores, ☎ 502/7-926-1363, fax 502/7-926-3322, www.ecomaya.com

Poptún & Vicinity

Finca El Tapir, 3a Calle, 4-74 Zona 3, Poptún, ☎ 502/7-491-9943, 7-927-7327.

Villa de los Castellanos, Village of Machaquilá, ☎ 502/7-927-7222, fax 502/7-927-7365.

Saxayche & Vicinity

Viajes Turísticos La Moñtana, on the main street, near the ferry, ☎ 502/7-928-6169, fax 7-928-6168. Owner: Julian Mariona.

Viajes Don Pedro, on the riverbank, ☎ 502/7-928-6109. Owner: Don Pedro Mendéz Requena.

Sierra Lacandón Park

CONAP, 19 Av B 0-83, Zona 15, Vista Hermosa II, Guatemala City, PBX 502/2-369-5151, www.defensores.org.gt.

Fundación Defensores de la Naturaleza , 19 Av B 083, Zona 15, Vista Hermosa II, Guatemala City, PBX 502/2-369-5151, www.defensores.org.gt.

Uaxactún

Carmelita, Cooperativa Integral de Comercialización, Comité de Turismo, Carmelita, San Andrés, ☎ 502/7-861-0366.

Western/Northern Petén

Ni'tun Eco-Lodge/Monkey Tours, San Andrés, ☎ 501/7-926-0807, www.nitun.com. Owner: Bernie Mittelstaedt.

Yaxhá

Campamento Ecológico El Sombrero, Laguna Yaxhá, ☎ 502/7-926-5229, fax 502/7-926-5228, www.ecotourism-adventure.com/sombrero.htm.

EL PROGRESSO DEPARTMENT

Sierra de las Minas Biosphere/Los Albores

Fundación Defensores de la Naturaleza , 2a Av 2-71, Zona 3, Río Hondo, Zacapa, ☎ 502/7-934-0161. The head office is at 19 Av B 083, Zona 15, Vista Hermosa II, Guatemala City, PBX 502/2-369-5151, www.defensores.org.gt.

Mataquescuintla Mountains/Volcán Ipala

Servicios Turísticos Brothers (Brothers Tour Services), Guatemala City, ☎/fax 502/2-255-2573, www.brostours.homestead.com.

Montecristo Tri-National Park

SalvaNatura, 33 Av Sur #640, Colonia Flor Blanca, San Salvador, El Salvador, ☎ 503/7-279-1515, fax 503/7-279-0220.

ESCUINTLA DEPARTMENT

Sipacate-Naranjo National Park

Aventuras Naturales, Colonia El Naranjo No 53, La Antigua, Sacatepéquez, ☎/fax 502/7-832-3328, http://elparedonsurfcamp.tripod.com.

HUEHUETENANGO DEPARTMENT

Huehuetenango Area

Unicornio Azul (Blue Unicorn), Hacienda Casco Chancol, Chiantla Chancol, ☎ 502/7-205-9328.

PROCUCH, Central Plaza, Huehuetenango City, ☎ 502/7-771-8139.

Laguna Magdalena

Paquixena Cooperative, Paquix, Huehuetenango. No phone.

IZABAL DEPARTMENT

Cerro San Gil

Fundación para el Ecodesarrollo y la Conservacíonde (FUNDAECO) 8a and 9a Calles, 2nd floor, Puerto Barrios, Izabal, ☎ 502/7-948-7110, 502/7-440-4615, fax 502/7-440-4605.

El Estor/Bocas de Polochíc

Defensores de la Naturaleza, 5a Av and 2a Calle Esquina, El Estor, ☎ 502/7-949-7237, rbocas@defensores.org.gt.

Punta de Manabique

FUNDARY, Estuardo Herrera, Director, Reserva Punta de Manabique, 17 Calle between 5ta and 6ta Av, Puerto Barrios, Izabal, ☎ 502/7-948-0435 or 7-948-0944.

Río Dulce & Vicinity

Asociación Ak'Tenamit, 11 Av A 9-39, Zona 2, Ciudad Nueva Ciudad de Guatemala, ☎ 502/2-254-1560, www.aktenamit.org.

MEXICO

Yaxchilán, Bonampak, Mexico

Escudo Jaguar Eco-tourism Center, Frontera Corozal, Municipal Ocosingo, Chiapas, ☎ 52-15/350-9600, 201-6440.

QUETZALTENANGO/XELA

Quetzaltrekkers, Casa Argentina, Diagonal 12, 8-37 Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-761-5865, www.quetzaltrekkers.com.

QUICHÉ

Ixcán/Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve

Akianto Travel, ☎ 52-9/612-2256 or 9/614-8333, akianto@prodigy.net.mx.

Viajes Marabasco, ☎ 52-9/613-9776, Chiapas, Mexico, www.ixcan.com.mx, mmorales@ci-mexixo.org.mx.

Ixil Triangle

PRODINT, www.nebaj.org, nebaj@quick.guate.com.

SANTA ROSA DEPARTMENT

Río Los Esclavos

PTP (Promotora Turistica Panamericana), 15 Calle, 3-20, Zona 10, Edificio Ejecutivo, Oficina 602, Aldea Los Esclavos, ☎ 502/7-363-4404, fax 502/7-363-4524, www.ptpmayas.com.

Hawaii-Monterrico Biotópo

CECON-USAC (Centro Estudios Conservacíonistas de Universidad de San Carlos), Monterrico Village, Santa Rosa. San Carlos University's Center for Conservation Studies (CECON), is at Av la Reforma 0-63, Zona 10, CP 01010, Guatemala City, ☎ 502/2-331-0904, fax 502/2-334 7664, www.usac.edu.gt/cecom, cecon@usac.edu.gt.

EMBASSIES

British Embassy, Av la Reforma and 16 Calle 0-55, Zona 10, Edificio Torre Internacional, Guatemala City, ☎ 502/2-367-5425/6/7/8/9, fax 502/2-367-5430. Open Monday-Thursday, 2-6:30 pm, 7:30-11 pm; Friday, 2-6 pm. Closed on weekends.

Canadian Embassy, 13 Calle 8-44, Zone 10, Edificio Edyma Plaza, Guatemala City, ☎ 502/2-333-6102/363-4348, fax 502/2-363-4208, www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/guatemala. Open Monday-Thursday, 8 am-5 pm.

US Embassy, Av la Reforma 7-01, Zone 10, Guatemala City, ☎ 502/2-331-1541 (8 am-5 pm) or ☎ 502/2-331-8904 for emergencies (5 pm-8 am), fax 502/2-331-0564, http://usembassy.state.gov/guatemala.

EMBASSIES & CONSULAR OFFICES OF GUATEMALA

Canada

Embassy:
130 Albert St. Suite 1010, Ottawa, Ontario. Canada, K1P 5G4, ☎ 613/233-7237 or 613/233-7188, fax 613/233-0135, embguate@webruler.com

Consular Offices:
PO Box 70508, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, M6P 4E7, ☎ 416/604-0655, fax 905/831-8164
Hornby Street Suite 760, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, V6Z 1S4, ☎ 604/688-5209, fax 604/688-5210, consulguatvan@intergate.bc.ca

United State

Embassy:
2220 R Street, NW, Washington, DC 20008, ☎ 202/745-4952, fax 202/745-1908, consulate@guatemala-embassy.org; open Mon.-Fri., 9 am-5 pm. The Jurisdiction includes the States of: Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, Ohio, Puerto Rico, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, Washington DC.

Consulate Offices:
200 N. Michigan Ave 6th Floor, Chicago, IL 60601, ☎ 312/332-1587, fax 312/332-4256, conguatch@aol.com. This Jurisdiction includes the States of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wisconsin.

3013 Fountain View Suite 210, Houston, TX 77057, ☎ 713/953-9531, fax 713/953-9383, consulguat@aol.com. This Jurisdiction includes the States of Arkansas, Kansas, Lousiana, Oklahoma, Nebraska, Missisippi, Texas.

1605 W. Olympic Blvd. #422, Los Angeles, CA 90015, ☎ 213/365-9251/2, fax 213/365-9245, lax@guatemala-consulate.org. This Jurisdiction includes the States of Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, Wyoming.

1101 Brickell Ave. #1003S, Miami, FL 33131, ☎ 305/679-9945/48, fax 305/679-9983, conguafin@bellsouth.net. This Jurisdiction includes the States of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina.

57 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10016, ☎ 212/686-3837, fax 212/889-5470, conguatny@aol.com. This Jurisdiction includes the States of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont.

1870 Market St. #667, San Francisco, CA 94102, ☎ 415/788-5651, fax 415/788-5653, guate-sf@sfconsulguate.org. This Jurisdiction includes the States of Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, Wyoming.

For more information, contact the Guatemala Embassy at www.guatemala-embassy.org.

EMERGENCY PHONE NUMBERS

Ambulance	122 or 123
Fire	123
Red Cross	125
Tourist Police	110 or 120

State Department Bureau of Consular Affairs, ☎ 202/647-5225, fax 202/647-3000, http://travel.state.gov/guatemala.html.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

ANTIGUA

Adventure Travel Center Viareal, S.A., 5a Av Norte #25B, ☎/fax 502/7-832-0162.

Aviatur Travel Agency, 5a Av Norte #33, Calle de Arco, ☎/fax 502/7-832-5067, aviatur@yahoo.com.mx.

Eco-Tour Chejo's, Sergio García, 3a Calle Poniente #24.

Maya Ital Tour, inside Hotel Posade Don Rodrigo, 5a Av Norte #19, ☎ 502/7-832-6502, fax 502/7-832-6162, mayaital@centramerica.com.

Mayan Paradise Tour and Travel Service, 5a Calle Poniente #6, ☎ 502/7-832-2071, fax 502/7-832-1838.

Monarca Travel, 6a Av Norte #6A, ☎/fax 502/7-832-4305, monarcas@conexion.com.gt.

Old Town Outfitters, 6a Calle Poniente #7, ☎ 502/7-832-4243, www.bikeguatemala.com.

Rain Forest, 4ta Av Norte #4A, ☎ 502/7-832-5670, fax 502/7-832-6299, www.rainforest.guate.com.

San Francisco Travel, 4a Calle Ponoenet #9, ☎ 502/7-832-4020.

Sin Fronteras, 5a Av Norte #15A, ☎ 502/7-832-1017, fax 502/7-832-8453, www.sinfront.com.

Space Travel Agency, 5a. Calle Poniente #3 A, ☎ 502/7-832-7143, fax 502/7-832-7143.

Turansa, 9a Calle, inside Hotel Villa Antigua, ☎ 502/7-832-2928, fax 502/7-832-4692, www.turansa.com.

Vision Travel, 3 Av Norte #3, ☎ 502/7-832-3293, fax 502/7-832-1955.

GUATEMALA

Mayaventura, 15 Calle 3-20, Zona 10, Centro Ejecutivo 408, Guatemala City, ☎ 502/2-363-4634, fax 502/2-333-7266, www.mayaventura.com.

La Vía Maya, Boulevard Liberación 6-31 Zona 9, Guatemala City, ☎ 502/2-339-3601, fax 502/2-339-3608, www.laviamaya.com.

Aire, Mar y Tierra (Air, Water and Earth), 6a Av 20-25, Zona 10, Edificio Plata Maritima, Guatemala City, ☎ 502/2-363-3486 or 2-337-0149.

Guatours, 20 Calle 5-35, Zona 10, Edificio Plaza Los Arcos, 3rd floor, Guatemala City, ☎ 502/2-337-0019, fax 502/2-333-5769, http://guatours.com .

PANAJACHEL, SOLOLÁ

Servicios Turístico Atitlán, 3a Av 3-47, Zona 2, ☎ 502/7-762-2075, fax 502/7-762-2246.

Lake Atitlán Resort Association (LARA), Calle Tijon, ☎ 502/7-219-2755, fax 502/7-762-2322. www.atitlan.com.

Veleros de Lago, Dragon Lady Cruises, Apartado 45, ☎ 502/7-906-9344, captain@a1boatsales.com.

Adventures in Education Inc., Posada Los Encuentros, Calle Santander, ☎ 502/7-762-2326.

QUETZALTENANGO/XELA

Adrenalina Tours, Pasaje Enriquez, 5a Av Sur, Zona 1, 502/7-761-0924, 7-761-0922, http://adrenalinatours.xelaenlinea.com.

Quetzal Adventures, Diagonal 12 8-37, Zona 1, ☎ 502/7-761-2470, www.quetzalventures.com.

VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

If you get inspired to help out and do some volunteer work in Guatemala there are literally hundreds of organizations looking for help. Usually you must commit to at least one to three months and speak a bit of Spanish.

Project Mosiaco Guatemala is an organization that matches international volunteers with 60 organizations in Guatemala working on human rights, environmental issues, healthcare, education and community development. It's a great source of information. Located at 3a Av Norte #3, Antigua, www.pmg.dk, ☎ 502/7-832-0955.

Peace Brigades International (PBI), http://peacebrigades.org. A British NGO (non-governmental organization) protecting human rights by sending volunteers to accompany clergy, union leaders, human rights activists and returning exiles.

WEBSITE DIRECTORY

INGUAT, the Guatemalan Tourism Board, operates the official website, www.guatemala.travel.com.gt. You can contact INGUAT at 4 Calle 4-37, Zone 9, Guatemala City, ☎ 502/2-421-2800 or 2810, in the US ☎ 888/464-8281.

BOOKS/MAGAZINES/NEWSPAPERS

Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes, http://cervantesvirtual.com. This virtual library has over 2,000 Spanish classics online from both sides of the Atlantic.

EntreMundos, www.entremundos.org, is an English-language monthly newsletter for the Quetzaltenango region.

The Guatemala Post, www.guatemalapost.com, is an English-language daily.

Prensalibre, www.prensalibre.com, is the primary Spanish-language daily.

Revue, www.revuemag.com, is Guatemala's English-language magazine, 4a Calle Oriente #23, La Antigua, ☎ fax 502/2-331-7151.

Siglo, Veintiuno, www.sigloxxi.com, is another Spanish daily.

GENERAL INFORMATION

http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/ca/guatemala. Site listing all general information websites, research programs, and environmental projects.

http://travel.state.gov/guatemala.html. US Consulate website.

www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/gt.html. Facts and figures about the country.

www.enjoyguatemala.com/hotels.htm. Useful site comparing some of the country's best hotels.

www.guatemalatravelmall.com. A travel site geared to help tourists plan their vacation.

www.guatemalaweb.com. Excellent information site on everything about Guatemala.

www.latinworld.com. Tons of info about Latin America.

www.maya-art-books.org. Volunteer and educational opportunities.

www.mayadiscovery.com. Learn more about El Mundo Maya.

www.quetzalnet.com. Business, tourism and economic statistics.

HEALTH SERVICES

www.mdtravelhealth.com/destinations/mamerica_carib/guatemala.html. The MD Travel Health Directory.

www.cdc.gov/travel/camerica.htm. National Center for Infectious Diseases.

HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE & NEWS

www.ghrc-usa.org. Guatemala Human Rights Commission/USA.

http://peacebrigades.org. Peace Brigades International (PBI).

DESTINATION-SPECIFIC WEBSITES

Antigua: www.aroundantigua.com

Cobán & Las Verapaces: www.dearbrutus.com/donjeronimo

Copán Ruins: www.copanruins.com; http://www.honduras.net/copan/

Lake Atitlán: www.atitlan.com

Momostenango: http://www.geocities.com/momostenango/visitorinfo1.htm

Río Dulce: www.mayaparadise.com

Quetzaltenango/Los Altos: www.xelapages.com; www.quetzalventures.com

SPANISH LANGUAGE

Learn Spanish, **www.lingolex.com/spanish.htm**

Study Spanish, **www.studyspanish.com**

RECOMMENDED READING

A Field Guide to the Amphibians and Reptiles of the Maya World: The Lowlands of Mexico, Northern Guatemala, and Belize, Julian C. Lee; Cornell University Press; ISBN 0801485878; July 2000.

A Field Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Adjacent Areas: Belize, Guatemala, and El Salvador, Ernest Preston Edwards, Edward Murrell Butler; University of Texas Press; ISBN 0292720912; July 1998.

A Field Guide to the Mammals of Central America & Southeast Mexico, Fiona A. Reid; Oxford University Press; ISBN 0195064011; February 1998.

A Forest of Kings: The Untold Story of the Ancient Maya, Linda Schele, David Freidel; Quill; ISBN 0688112048; January 1992.

Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala, Stephen C. Schlesinger, Stephen Kinzer, John H. Coatsworth, Richard A. Nuccio; Harvard University Press; ISBN 0674075900; Expanded edition, August 1999.

Bridge of Courage: Life Stories of the Guatemalan Companeros and Companeras, Jennifer Harbury, Noam Chomsky; Common Courage Press; ISBN 156751068X; Updated edition, June 1995.

Conquest and Survival in Colonial Guatemala, William George Lovell; McGill-Queens University Press; ISBN 0773504338; revised edition, March 1992.

Copán: The Rise and Fall of a Classic Maya Kingdom, David Webster, Anncorinne Freter, Nancy Gonlin; Wadsworth Publishing Company; ISBN 0155058088; 1st edition, October 1999.

Guatemala in the Spanish Colonial Period, Oakah L., Jr. Jones; University of Oklahoma Press; ISBN 0806126035; April 1994.

In Focus Guatemala: A Guide to the People, Politics and Culture, Trish O'Kane; Interlink Publishing Group; ISBN 1566562422; February 1999.

I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala, Rigoberta Menchu; Verso Books; ISBN 0860917886; August 1987.

Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan, John Stephen; Dover Publications, ISBN 048622404X; reprinted June 1969, first published 1873.

Maya Art and Architecture (World of Art), Mary Ellen Miller; Thames & Hudson; ISBN 050020327X; November 1999.

Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman's Path, David Freidel, Linda Schele; Quill; ISBN 0688140696; Reissue edition, February 1995.

Reading the Maya Glyphs, Michael D. Coe, Mark Van Stone; Thames & Hudson; ISBN 0500051100; November 2001.

Rites: A Guatemalan Boyhood, Victor Perera; Mercury House; ISBN: 156279065X; Reprint edition October 1994.

Searching for Everardo: A Story of Love, War and the CIA in Guatemala, Jennifer K. Harbury; Warner Books; ISBN 0446673625; January 2000.

Secret History: The Cia's Classified Account of Its Operations in Guatemala, ***1952-1954,*** Nick Cullather and Piero Gleijeses; Stanford University Press; ISBN 0804733112; June 1999.

Silence on the Mountain: Stories of Terror, Betrayal, and Forgetting in Guatemala, Daniel Wilkinson; Houghton Mifflin; ISBN 0618221395; September 2002.

Tikal: An Illustrated History of the Ancient Maya Capital, John Montgomery; Hippocrene Books; ISBN 0781808537; September 2001.

The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art, Linda Schele, Mary Ellen Miller; George Braziller Publishing; ISBN 0807612782; reprint edition, May 1992.

The Ecotraveller's Wildlife Guide, Belize and Northern Guatemala, Les Beletsky; Academic Press; ISBN 0120848112; December 1998.

The Fall of the Ancient Maya: Solving the Mystery of the Maya Collapse, David Webster, Thames & Hudson; ISBN: 0500051135; May 2002.

The History of Coffee in Guatemala, Regina Wagner; Villegas Editores; ISBN 9588156017; January 2002.

The Maya of Guatemala: Life and Dress, Carmen L. Pettersen; University of Washington Press; ISBN 0295955376; May 1977.

SPANISH GLOSSARY

DAYS OF THE WEEK

domingo	Sunday
lunes	Monday
martes	Tuesday
miercoles	Wednesday
jueves	Thursday
viernes	Friday
sabado	Saturday

MONTHS OF THE YEAR

enero	January
febrero	February
marzo	March
abril	April
mayo	May
junio	June
julio	July
agosto	August

septiembre	September
octubre	October
noviembre	November
diciembre	December

NUMBERS

uno	one
dos	two
tres	three
cuatro	four
cinco	five
seis	six
siete	seven
ocho	eight
nueve	nine
diez	ten
once	eleven
doce	twelve
trece	thirteen
catorce	fourteen
quince	fifteen
dieciséis	sixteen
diecisiete	seventeen
dieciocho	eighteen
diecinueve	nineteen
veinte	twenty
veintiuno	twenty-one
veintidós	twenty-two
treinta	thirty
cuarenta	forty
cincuenta	fifty
sesenta	sixty
setenta	seventy
ochenta	eighty
noventa	ninety
cienone	hundred
ciento uno	one hundred one
doscientos	two hundred
quinientos	five hundred
mil	one thousand
mil uno	one thousand one
mil dos	two thousand
un millón	one million
mil millones	one billion
primero	first
segundo	second
tercero	third
cuarto	fourth
quinto	fifth
sexto	sixth
séptimo	seventh
octavo	eighth
noveno	ninth
décimo	tenth
undécimo	eleventh

duodécimo	twelfth
último	last

CONVERSATION

¿Como esta usted?	How are you?
¿Bien, gracias, y usted?	Well, thanks, and you?
Buenas dias.	Good morning.
Buenas tardes.	Good afternoon.
Buenas noches.	Good evening/night.
Hasta la vista.	See you again.
Hasta luego.	So long.
¡Buena suerte!	Good luck!
Adios.	Goodbye.
Mucho gusto de conocerle.	Glad to meet you.
Felicidades.	Congratulations.
Muchas felicidades.	Happy birthday.
Feliz Navidad.	Merry Christmas.
Feliz Año Nuevo.	Happy New Year.
Gracias.	Thank you.
Por favor.	Please.
De nada/con mucho gusto.	You're welcome.
Perdoneme.	Pardon me.
¿Como se llama esto?	What do you call this?
Lo siento.	I'm sorry.
Quisiera...	I would like...
Adelante.	Come in.
Permitame presentarle...	May I introduce...
¿Como se llamo usted?	What is your name?
Me llamo...	My name is...
No se.	I don't know.
Tengo sed.	I am thirsty.
Tengo hambre.	I am hungry.
Soy norteamericano/a	I am an American.
¿Donde puedo encontrar...?	Where can I find...?
¿Que es esto?	What is this?
¿Habla usted ingles?	Do you speak English?
Hablo/entiendo un poco Español	I speak/understand a little Spanish.
Hay alguien aqui que hable ingles?	Is there anyone here who speaks English?
Le entiendo.	I understand you.
No entiendo.	I don't understand.
Hable mas despacio por favor.	Please speak more slowly.
Repita por favor.	Please repeat.

TELLING TIME

¿Que hora es?	What time is it?
Son las...	It is...
... cinco.	... five o'clock.
... ocho y diez.	... ten past eight.
... seis y cuarto.	... quarter past six.
... cinco y media.	... half past five.
... siete y menos cinco.	... five of seven.
antes de ayer.	the day before yesterday.
anoche.	yesterday evening.
esta mañana.	this morning.

a mediodia.	at noon.
en la noche.	in the evening.
de noche.	at night.
mañana en la mañana.	tomorrow morning.
mañana en la noche.	tomorrow evening.
pasado mañana.	the day after tomorrow.

DIRECTIONS

¿En que direccion queda...?	In which direction is...?
Lleveme a... por favor.	Take me to... please.
Llevame alla ... por favor.	Take me there please.
¿Que lugar es este?	What place is this?
¿Donde queda el pueblo?	Where is the town?
¿Cual es el mejor camino para...?	Which is the best road to...?
Malécon	Road by the sea.
De vuelta a la derecha.	Turn to the right.
De vuelta a la isquierda.	Turn to the left.
Siga derecho.	Go this way.
En esta dirección.	In this direction.
¿A que distancia estamos de...?	How far is it to...?
¿Es este el camino a...?	Is this the road to...?
Es...	Is it...
¿... cerca?	... near?
¿... lejos?	... far?
¿... norte?	... north?
¿... sur?	... south?
¿... este?	... east?
¿... oeste?	... west?
Indiqueme por favor.	Please point.
Hagame favor de decirme donde esta...	Please direct me to...
... el telefono.	... the telephone.
... el bano.	... the bathroom.
... el correo.	... the post office.
... el banco.	... the bank.
... la comisaria.	... the police station.

ACCOMMODATIONS

Estoy buscando un hotel...	I am looking for a hotel that's...
... bueno.	... good.
... barato.	... cheap.
... cercano.	... nearby.
... limpio.	... clean.
¿Dónde queda un buen hotel?	Where is a good hotel?
¿Hay habitaciones libres?	Do you have available rooms?
¿Dónde están los baños/servicios?.	Where are the bathrooms?
Quisiera un...	I would like a...
... cuarto sencillo.	... single room.
... cuarto con baño.	... room with a bath.
... cuarto doble.	... double room.
¿Puedo verlo?	May I see it?
¿Cuanto cuesta?.	What's the cost?
¡Es demasiado caro!	It's too expensive!

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